

Engaging Public Officials

You are your lawmaker's boss.

Use that influence; you don't have to be an issue expert or a professional lobbyist. All you need to do is (1) remember it's just about communicating and educating someone on the things you care about, and (2) keep focused on why you are there.

Your visit should accomplish both short-term and long-term goals. Short-term goals include persuading your decision maker to vote on the pro-environmental side of an issue, cosponsor a bill, etc. Long-term goals include developing a relationship with your elected officials and their staff and educating them on larger issues. Never discount the importance of staff — their job is to evaluate policy issues and advise their boss on the position to take.

When you meet with elected officials, you take with you two messages. The first is substantive: "Please cosponsor ____; please vote for ____." The second is political and you deliver that message by simply walking through the door — people in the district are willing to take the time to present their views in person.

BEFORE YOU MEET

Prepare in advance

- Establish your goal for the meeting and be ready to describe the purpose of your meeting.
- Schedule an appointment — Call or drop by your decision maker's office. Tell them you are a constituent and you would like to make an appointment with [your decision maker] to speak about [your topic]. Oftentimes, the legislator cannot meet you but her/his staff can; meetings with staff are just as important. Be polite, but persistent. Follow up until you are able to schedule a meeting with your representative or their office. Find out how much time you will have for the meeting.
- Recruit other constituents to join you. Work with state or National Audubon staff if you need help recruiting additional constituents.
- Develop goals and an agenda for the meeting.
- Prepare an issue fact sheet and gather any other relevant materials to share with each member of your group. Use these resources to create an information packet for your decision maker (e.g. will you be inviting them on a field trip? Be sure to include upcoming field trip information).
- Organize a pre-meeting meeting with your group to choose a spokesperson, and go over the agenda and talking points. Have a specific ask that each group member can ask and explain. A pre-meeting helps get everyone to the legislator meeting on time — and prepare for the most effective discussion.

DURING YOUR MEETING

Tell your story — make it local and personal

- Always be polite, positive, and professional.
- Listen for shared values during discussions — they may come out in a bird story, a personal experience, or a political win.
- Make sure everyone introduces themselves as a constituent.

- Start off your meeting by thanking the lawmaker or staffer for meeting with you and for any past helpful support.
- Have your spokesperson lay out the issue and share the information packet you created. Ask for the lawmaker's position on the issue or legislation.
- Share a personal story about why birds matter to you. This will help them remember your meeting.
- Listen. After you speak, give the legislator a chance to respond and share information.
- Make your specified ask. Politely press for a commitment. If the legislator is not able to state her/his position at the time of the meeting, ask when you should follow up (usually within a week of the visit) and how (by phone or email) to inquire about any action taken.
- Invite your lawmaker on a field trip or to special event.
- Take a photo with your lawmaker or staffer and post it to social media. Inquire whether the office has a social media presence and if they would like you to tag their office in your post.
- Close the meeting with a "thank you", regardless of whether or not the lawmaker will do what you want them to do.

FOLLOWING UP AFTER YOUR MEETING

Say thank you

- Send a Thank You letter. This is another opportunity to make your point. If the congressional office made a commitment, remind them of this in your letter. If they showed interest in going on a birding trip, solidify arrangements and logistics.
- Audubon staff and members can benefit from what you learned – share your experience on Audubon Works.

The Art of Talking with your Decision Maker

1. **Emphasize what is known.** Stop leading with unknowns, caveats, and disclaimers. What you start with is what people remember. Give details later if need be.
2. **Invert the standard order for reporting.** Start with the main points, then give the background. Say why it matters up front.
3. **Less is more.** Stick to simple, clear messages about what's important and repeat them often.
4. **Stop speaking in code.** Choose plain language over technical terms, insider jargon, and acronyms. (E.g. Use Fahrenheit if that is what's most familiar to your audience. Human-caused, not anthropogenic.)
5. **Research.** Learn more about their background, voting record and what groups and individuals have contributed to their campaigns. Here are some resources:
 - a) Bios on their official website
 - b) <https://votesmart.org/> - review voting history and see environmental scores
 - c) <http://www.opensecrets.org/> - who were the biggest contributors for their campaign
 - d) <https://www.countable.us/> - voting record