



# ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH LAWMAKERS

Each year, a small group of conservation district officials made visits to their U.S. Congressional Representatives' offices. As they walked between appointments, discussion typically revolved around whether or not the last visit was a good one. The group measured their success by how well the legislator or staff member seemed to understand the message they delivered. After leaving one particular appointment with a relatively new Congressman, the district officials were frustrated that he just didn't "get it."

He was in the room, but he really didn't seem to relate to our issues," stated one district official. The others agreed.

Another district official exclaimed, "It was the same with our second appointment this morning, and we have met with him every year for the past five years during these trips!"

If this conversation sounds familiar to you, it is time to examine your relationship with your elected officials. Developing and maintaining personal relationships with elected officials at all levels is an important part of successfully delivering your conservation message and influencing legislation, policy and budgets. Developing a strong personal relationship with decision makers is critical, and it does not have to be difficult.

Over the years, NACD has conducted a variety of surveys of conservation districts. A vast majority have indicated that "lobbying for federal conservation programs that provide resources for conservation districts" is the most important function that NACD carries out. Similarly, a high percentage of the responses indicate that conservation districts are highly satisfied with the services NACD provides in legislative affairs and helping districts with access to Congress.

However, sometimes districts indicate that they would rather focus on state and local issues and rely on NACD to work on issues at the national level. Ironically, it is *you*, our members who are needed to

carry out grassroots advocacy on the national level by personally contacting your members of Congress. They want to hear from you on all conservation-related issues. The NACD Board is responsible for fostering a single, unified voice for conservation, but it is *your* responsibility to take that voice to Capitol Hill. To your member of Congress, yours is the only voice that matters!

An important part of NACD's legislative efforts is grassroots advocacy. When legislation related to NACD's legislative priorities begins to move, NACD calls upon conservation districts across the country to communicate with elected officials and their staff about issues that impact local conservation efforts. It is a similar process when working with state and local levels of government. Conservation districts work with state legislators or county officials to ensure natural resource conservation policy is written in a way that works and that conservation programs have adequate funding.

A key to having the greatest impact when participating in grassroots advocacy is building relationships with lawmakers and their staff. Lawmakers are always interested in hearing from constituents, and conservation district officials possess a great deal of influence and credibility related to natural resource programs. The next few pages include some valuable resources that can be used to develop and maintain strong relationships with decision makers at all levels.

## Establishing Relationships

Legislative bodies at all levels of government are constantly changing. New lawmakers are elected frequently and legislative staff members are always coming and going. If you have never met or do not know your lawmakers or their staff, it is never too late to find an opportunity to introduce yourself and get acquainted. Specific opportunities can include:

- Contact the lawmaker's district office to schedule a personal meeting with him or her when they are back home meeting with constituents;
- Attend a town hall meeting held by your lawmakers;
- Request a meeting with a member of your lawmaker's staff. Staff members are often more accessible for scheduling face-to-face meetings; and
- Attend events attended by lawmakers that are hosted by state or local associations, charitable organizations, or political parties to which you belong.

Check your local newspapers or visit your lawmaker's website for announcements of meetings or other opportunities.

## Maintaining Relationships

The work involved in establishing a relationship with your lawmakers is only half of the equation. There are many people seeking to build relationships with lawmakers in an effort to advance a variety of policy agendas. As a result, efforts to maintain established relationships should be ongoing and persistent. Below are some methods for maintaining your established relationship.

- Provide regular constituent correspondence with federal lawmakers by participating in NACD Action Alerts and providing information that is specific to your local area. It is important for lawmakers to know how programs will work back home.
- Participate in NACD's Legislative Conference and meet with your federal lawmakers in Washington, D.C.
- Host conservation tours to highlight successful implementation of programs.



(left) North Carolina conservation leaders James Ferguson and Franklin Williams welcomed North Carolina Congressman Howard Coble to NACD's 2008 Congressional Reception. (right) NACD Board Member Andrew Wargo discusses state conservation issues with Arkansas Congressman Marion Berry at NACD's 2008 Congressional Reception.



- Serve on relevant advisory committees that your lawmakers might convene.
- Host issue forums and invite lawmakers to participate.
- Attend and participate in town hall meetings.

Remember that lawmakers are people too. Make sure that any contact with them is in the appropriate context and does not infringe upon their personal or family life.

## Hosting Conservation Tours

Inviting your lawmakers and their staff to participate in a conservation tour is a valuable opportunity to maintain a mutual relationship. Your lawmakers will develop a better sense of how the conservation programs they influence are implemented on the ground and see first-hand the benefits of sound natural resource management for the community. Tours also provide opportunities to highlight program successes, suggestions for improvement, or provide education on emerging issues. The following are some key points in planning a tour:

- Plan tours during Congressional recess periods. Lawmakers will have the most time to take tours during this time.
- Send a written letter of invitation to lawmakers and staff. Offer several dates for the visit to accommodate the lawmaker's schedule. Sometimes it can require several invitations before the lawmaker accepts.

(left) Partners from across Wyoming gathered last summer for the Sublette County Conservation District's Ecological Site Description tour. The SCCD Board served as host to the County Commissioner, representatives from Wyoming Game and Fish, Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, Wyoming Grazing Association, Natural Resources Conservation Service and others.



- Confirm the visit with your lawmaker's scheduler or district manager. This may require several telephone calls. Make sure to also invite key staff, such as the legislative assistant for agriculture or natural resource issues.
- Ask your state association representative to help plan and participate in the tour.
- Invite local news media to participate in the tour.
- Consult with NACD Government Affairs staff for guidance on current federal issues to discuss with the lawmaker.
- Develop an agenda that allows enough time for the tour and a briefing on the issues of concern to your conservation district. There also should be ample time for the lawmaker to meet and talk with cooperators along the way.
- Use the tour as an opportunity to communicate with your lawmaker about the issues affecting conservation districts and how these issues affect natural resources. Be sure to prepare handouts for the lawmaker and staff to take home with them.
- Arrange to have a photographer take pictures of the lawmaker and district officials during the tour. The pictures can be useful in future district or state association communications or when creating a press release about the tour.
- Send a note of thanks to your lawmaker after the tour is over. Do the same thing for any staff who also attended.

## Information Gathering

For meetings and tours, it is always good to be prepared and to speak knowledgeably about the topic on which you are meeting. This involves making sure you have adequate information about what you want to share with your lawmakers. Thoroughly research the topic you want to talk about, try to know your lawmaker's position by looking at his or her past legislation, news releases, or editorials on the topic, and look for areas of current activity on the topic in your lawmaker's district

## Congressional Schedule

Knowing when Congress is in and out of session can help you plan meetings and tours more effectively with federal lawmakers. Members of Congress generally are in Washington, D.C. while Congress is in session and return home during recess and after adjournment. While specific dates vary from year to year, Congress generally follows the following schedule for recess periods:

**January** – Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

**February** – Presidents' Day

**April** – Spring District Work Period

**May** – Memorial Day District Work Period

**July** – Independence Day District Work Period

**August** – Summer District Work Period

**September** – Labor Day

**October** – December – Target Adjournment\*  
(\*varies on an annual basis)

## Things You Should Do and Not Do

### Do:

- Schedule your appointment well in advance
- Be punctual for your meeting
- Dress appropriately for the occasion
- Prepare adequate materials, handouts and a brief leave behind
- Stay focused on your issue
- Provide relevant, specific examples from the legislator's home district
- Follow up after your meeting to answer any questions or unresolved issues

### Don't:

- Show up 15 minutes late
- Talk about your recent doctor's appointment
- Wear your work boots
- Bring everyone you know to the meeting
- Get upset if you only get to meet with staff
- Wear out your welcome
- Mix personal and professional agendas



(center) In October 2008 the Pecan Bayou SWCD joined forces with local, state and federal partners to host Texas Congressman Mike Connaway on a field tour showcasing local flood control structures and EQIP projects. In the picture on the left, SWCD Director Jule Richmond and a local FFA student discuss native grass identification with Congressman Connaway.

(right) Congressman Jerry Moran brought together various partners for a "Partners in Conservation" tour last spring in Kansas. Pictured at left with the Congressman are FSA County Executive Director Aaron Fall, NRCSS State Conservationist Eric Banks, and Kansas Association of Conservation Districts board member Bevin Law.

## Checklist

Make sure to review your plans before any meeting with lawmakers. Double check to be sure you:

- ✓ Know the date, time and location of the meeting;
- ✓ Have specific topics to discuss;
- ✓ Prepare materials and handouts for lawmakers and staff; and
- ✓ Bring plenty of business cards.

## Ideas for Effective Tours

Tours are a great way to give lawmakers first-hand experience with conservation programs. Some ideas for effective tours include:

- Visiting with local producers who have utilized conservation district services to enroll in federal or state conservation programs;
- Conducting a boat tour to talk about water. This can include water quality or quantity, riparian habitat, streambank erosion and any number of other issues;
- Showcasing demonstration projects or other innovative conservation practices;
- Walking tours to highlight neighborhood conservation projects or opportunities to implement conservation practices; and
- Tours of forestland to show sustainable forest management, wildfire risk or impact, and wildlife habitat.



"It all begins with Soil and Water!" explained Hardin Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) Board Chair Jerry McBride to Cliff Hite (pictured above). Mr. Hite was running for a seat in Ohio's General Assembly, but he had never heard of a conservation district. The Hardin SWCD did not wait until Mr. Hite was elected; they introduced themselves while he was on the campaign trail and educated him about the importance of conservation and districts. Since elected, Representative Hite has become a major supporter of the Hardin SWCD, attending the Districts' various meetings, conservation tours and Customer Appreciation Days. Hite was also instrumental in securing a substantial funding increase for Ohio's 88 SWCDs.

Regardless of the type of activity, be sure to do your homework, prepare relevant information sheets or handouts, and be ready to answer questions.

**E**stablishing and maintaining quality working relationships with your elected officials is not difficult, but it is extremely important! For you to have an effective dialogue and the ability to influence legislation, policy and funding, your elected officials need to know you on a first-name basis. As a locally-elected conservation district official, one of your many duties and responsibilities is to work with local, state and federal elected officials to help carry out your conservation program. NACD counts on your engagement and participation as a local leader to develop these close personal relationships.

To learn more about how your district can develop and maintain successful relationships with your lawmakers, visit NACD's website at [www.nacdnet.org](http://www.nacdnet.org).

Minnesota State Representative Rick Hansen (left) and Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts President Steve Sunderland (right) participate in a legislative tour in Southeast Minnesota. The tour gave Rep. Hansen and other participants an opportunity to view soil and water conservation district projects and on-the-ground results.



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