



Oklahoma Conservation Commission

District Directors' Responsibilities:

A 10-Minute Guide Series

This is one in a continuing series of informational/discussion topics designed to help conservation district directors become more informed and knowledgeable about their responsibilities. It is suggested that board members review these guides before a board meeting and then have a ten-minute discussion on them at a meeting.

Guide No. 29 - Working With Legislators / Congressmen

It is important that Oklahoma Legislators and U. S. Congress members be kept informed and educated of the conservation needs and successes in your district and the state. Their support is essential for conservation funding and legislation. Conservation district board members play a major role in this information and education effort. Here are a few tips on working effectively with lawmakers.

Working with State Legislators

Establishing Relationships With State Legislators

It is important to establish a relationship with new lawmakers as soon as possible. New state legislators may not be familiar with conservation districts or their mission. Once this relationship is established, it needs to be nurtured and maintained.

Ways to Get Acquainted With Lawmakers:

- ◆ Contact their office to schedule an appointment.
- ◆ Participate in events that are attended by legislators.
- ◆ Invite them to attend a district board meeting, an Oklahoma Association of Conservation District (OACD) area or state meeting, or other district meeting.
- ◆ Invite them to attend a conservation tour or other district event.
- ◆ Hold a legislative luncheon or breakfast.
- ◆ Participate in state capitol visits sponsored by the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts.

Develop a Legislative Plan

Districts can be more effective in working with legislators by developing a legislative plan. A plan will ensure that all board members are informed of what will be done and all will voice the same message.

The plan doesn't have to be long or in great detail, but could include such things as:

- ◆ Names of legislators that the district need to develop a better relationship with, or provide additional information and education about the district's needs.

- ◆ List of district needs or issues to present to legislators.
- ◆ Key messages to present to legislators.
- ◆ Methods of getting key messages to legislators (visits, mail, tours, etc.).
- ◆ Board members designated to carry out the plan.

Keep Legislators Informed

- ◆ Include them on mailing list for newsletters, news releases, meeting notices, etc.
- ◆ Send them monthly board minutes, long range plans, joint plan of operations, annual reports, budget requests, O&M and rehabilitation plans.
- ◆ Provide them with pamphlets or brochures about the district.
- ◆ Send them letters on key issues or concerns.
- ◆ Phone calls to their offices are effective and a fast means of getting your message to them. But, be prepared before you call. Have your key message(s) organized in a few short sentences. If you call about specific legislation, know the proposed Bill Number and Name, so they will know immediately why you are calling.

Continued on back page.

Visiting a Legislator's Office:

- ◆ Use your time wisely, you will likely only have a few minutes with a legislator.
- ◆ Be prepared - Have your key points organized, so that you can get your message across in limited time. Keep it simple.
- ◆ Present your issue from the legislator's perspective. They will want to know how it will benefit their district, how much it will cost, what will happen if nothing is done, and if there is opposition from other groups or individuals.
- ◆ Be clear and specific in what action you are requesting.
- ◆ Be prepared to answer questions.
- ◆ Have your issue in a written format (one-page fact sheet) to leave with the legislator. It should contain what it is you are asking for and details about project or need including costs and benefits and other pertinent information.
- ◆ Leave your name and contact information on written information or business card.
- ◆ Be kind, courteous, and friendly to staff, assistants, and receptionists. Many times they are the gatekeeper to contacting the legislator. This is an important person to have a good relationship with.
- ◆ Follow up your visit with a note to the legislator, thanking them for meeting with you and for consideration of your proposal or needs.

Working With U. S. Congressmen

Many of the same tips related to state legislators also apply to working with U. S. Representatives and Senators. But there are a few things that are different. Here are a few additional things districts need to consider when working with Congressmen.

It is important to get acquainted with staffers. It is often easier to get access to them than a Congressman. Plus, staffers do much of the day-to-day work and they need to be informed on issues. Many staffers are young and may have limited knowledge about conservation.

Some staffers work in the Washington D. C. office, but there are also staffers in field offices in the state. Field office locations can be found on the Congressmen/Senators' websites.

Contacting Congressmen by mail used to be the most effective way to reach them. But today, because of security issues, it can take weeks for a letter to reach their office. If letters are used they should be faxed to their offices (both local and Washington D. C. offices).

Email can be used, but some Congressmen are cautious about opening attachments and some only accept email using the form on their website, which limits the size of messages. Phone calls are still effective.

Congressmen hold town-hall meetings that offer opportunities to express conservation needs or concerns and to get acquainted. This is an excellent opportunity for face time with a Congressman or their field staff. It also keeps conservation issues in the public eye of your community. Don't take for granted that they understand conservation issues.

General Tips:

In most cases you will be much more knowledgeable about conservation than your legislator or Congressman or their staffers.

Legislators and Congressmen work for you, so don't hesitate to contact them.

Districts should be the information resource for legislators and Congressmen on conservation issues. Encourage your Legislators and Congressmen to call the district office when they have questions about conservation or natural resource issues. They appreciate a constituent "expert" to consult with about matters of special interest.

Publicly recognize legislators for their service and support.

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