

## Working with Policymakers

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Connecting with policymakers at local, national, and international levels is a powerful way to amplify and connect your work to leaders outside traditional academic circles. By doing so, you bring new knowledge to the decision-making table and can become a trusted source for information. Policymakers do not suffer from a lack of information; rather, they have too much. As a scientist, you can provide clarity on an issue in a concise and relevant way that helps shape the development of sound policy.

### **Understanding policymakers**

Policymakers are accountable to the voters who elect them. Their ability to support particular policies depends on the timing of their election cycle and if/how a particular issue will affect the citizens they represent. Getting your message to resonate with policymakers requires taking into account what matters to their voters, knowing their record related to the issue at hand, their own interests and leadership on the topic, and whether the political climate is ripe to capitalize on and benefit from your work. At the end of the day, policymakers are people trying to make the best decision they can with the information they have for the people they represent.

### **What does a policymaker need from you?**

- Make yourself available: political issues come and go quickly, and often there is a brief window to capitalize on any given topic
- Culture: understand their world and what they are up against; they have many demands on their time, voters to listen to, and various interests they must account for
- Filter: there's so much noise out there, you can serve as a credible filter
- Relevance and Timeliness: make connections to why this is important now
- Clarity: get to the point in a jargon-free way
- Human connection: paint a picture of how the issue affects the citizens of their district
- Persistence: realize your initial conversation may be the first step of many to engage a policymaker on this issue

### **How do you prepare for a meeting?**

Policymakers are more accessible than you might think. But even if your elected official is not available, keep in mind that sometimes the most effective way to be heard is through their staff. If you do get a meeting, remember to:

- Hone your primary message: what's the one thing you want him/her to remember?
- Understand the context: think about your message in the context of the decision at hand
- Know the facts around your issue and brainstorm questions that might come up

- Build trust with empathy: understand and acknowledge how their voters might be affected
- Look for ways to share your knowledge that avoid the use of jargon (practicing with someone from outside your discipline can be very helpful)
- Be prepared for derailments in your conversation and make a list of ways to adjust the course to stay on track
- Create a list of key individuals from stakeholder groups that matter to your policymaker—like business owners, community leaders or agency directors—who also support your position
- Bring a handout, like a fact sheet or graphic that relates to your visit and the topic discussed
- Follow up to answer specific questions and provide more information

### **How do I connect with policymakers?**

- Work with the Marketing and Communications team at the College of the Environment for tool and ideas
- Reach out to the policymaker directly and their relevant staff through via email and/or phone
- Call your local office and ask to speak to the aide that handles your issue
- Invite the policymaker to meet you in person at their place of work or your office/lab
- Follow up your conversations by phone or email

The Marketing and Communications team at the College Environment is here to help you. We can provide more information, opportunities for training and practice, customized feedback, and more.

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