



3.2 MEETING WITH DECISION-MAKERS

Meeting in-person with legislators and agency administrators can be an effective method of advocacy. While more time-consuming than simply writing a letter, in-person meetings provide several advantages; face-to-face time with decision makers and/or their staff is extremely valuable to your efforts.

Benefits of a Meeting

In-person meetings provide four main benefits:

1. *Personal conveyance of your position on the issue to policymakers.*

An in-person meeting allows you to have an actual conversation about the topic. You will be able to express your passion, personal insights from working in the wildlife field, and concerns effectively. In-person meetings allow prompt discussion about specific details, concerns, and potential solutions.

2. *Raise attention for the issue in that policymaker's office and provide valuable education on the subject.*

In-person meetings may aid greatly in raising the profile of the wildlife policy issue in the office. They will take the time to listen to you and will do their best to understand the issue. Meetings enable you to educate the office on the topic and leave behind additional information.

3. *Obtain a better understanding of the policymaker's perspectives, priorities, opinions, and approach regarding your policy issue.*

A meeting allows you to have a two-sided conversation. Rather than simply being able to state your perspectives as you would in a letter, you will also get a chance to ask about and listen to the policymaker's thoughts and perspectives. This provides valuable insights into how they feel about the subject, whether or not they might support your efforts, and whether or not they really see this as a priority item that warrants pursuit.

4. *Establishment of a trusting relationship with the policymaker's office.*

Trust is built over time – and trust can go a long way in the policy world. Face to face meetings allow you to really make progress in building a working relationship with the office. In-person meetings build understanding and allow for open dialogue – through relationship building, you can start to find ways to work together to address the issues.

Which Offices to Meet

Since in-person meetings require more of your time and potentially more of your resources, you want to be sure to make them as worthwhile as possible. To do that, you need to strategize on who would be the best person to meet with; this is likely going to be based on who is

- 1) in a position of power that can move your issue forward.
- 2) is someone that has the potential to support your issue, but doesn't currently.
- 3) is someone that supports your issue, but could use some encouragement to continue doing so or address it in a new way.

Generally speaking, it is not overly helpful to spend time meeting with people who are adamantly opposed to your issue and have made several public statements opposing your desired action. These individuals will be a tough sell in getting them to switch their positions publicly. But if you have the extra time it doesn't hurt to try to change their minds!

People in powerful positions within legislatures usually include Majority and Minority Leaders and Committee Chairs and Ranking members. You also have some good leverage when meeting with your own elected representative, as you are their constituent. If you are initiating a new concept, or want to have a general meeting, try meeting with a legislator who has a personal connection to wildlife in some way (hunter, birder, hiker, etc.) that will likely be supportive of your efforts.

Within a government agency, you should try to meet with someone as high up as possible that oversees the wildlife management or policy regulation you wish to discuss. This will likely include program directors, agency chiefs, operations managers/directors, assistant/deputy directors, etc.

Arranging a Meeting

There are several opportunities and venues by which you may choose to meet with your elected representatives. Which method you choose will likely depend on your overall goals of the meeting and how formal of a discussion you wish to have with the office. You can attend a "town hall" meeting as a constituent, schedule an in-person meeting in their home district office, attend public functions hosted by the representative, invite the policy maker to your group's meeting, or choose to meet them at their state or federal capitol office.

You can schedule a meeting with a legislator simply by calling their office and asking to speak with their scheduler. Let them know what you wish to discuss with their office and provide them with a couple of days that you are available to meet. They will likely assign you to a meeting with a staffer.

When scheduling a meeting, consider scheduling around events on the annual and congressional calendar. It may be best to meet:

- *Between congressional sessions or during other recesses:* Elected officials may be easier to meet within their home districts when congress is not in session; their staff is also usually less busy during these times.
- *When a bill has been introduced, prior to committee markup or hearing:* It might be beneficial to meet and discuss a particular bill after that bill has been assigned to a committee, prior to the committee's markup or hearing on the bill.
- *Start of a new congressional session:* this is a good time to meet new members of the legislature and introduce yourself and your organization. Refer to your state legislature's website regarding the congressional calendar.
- *Start of the budgeting process:* If your issue involves the budget, you may want to meet with the legislature after the Executive Office has released their proposed budget and prior to action by the legislature's appropriation committee.

More information on when to become involved in the policy process is available in [Section 5.1](#).

Preparing for the Meeting

You want to go into the meeting well prepared, with a well identified purpose, a solid understanding of your main points, and some insight into where the individual(s) you are meeting with stands on the subject.

Prepare for the meeting by quickly researching the policymaker's background. Try to get an understanding of their history with related issues; their political affiliations and what that might mean regarding potential support or opposition to your issue; what their constituency is like, what the primary concerns are in their district, and how your issue may relate to their constituency. Also look into the policymaker's staff. Odds are high, particularly with legislators, that you will ultimately meet with the staff member in charge of subject matter related to your topic rather than the legislator. Even if you do meet directly with the legislator or agency director, you can count on their staff being a part of the meeting. You might be able to find some insightful background information on these people as well that will help you understand their perspectives.

Use your first-hand wildlife experience and understanding of the issue as well as insights gained in your background research of the policymaker to develop a few key points you want to make on the topic. Be sure to make these very clear and fairly concise – these are the “take-home” messages you want the policymaker to remember.

You may consider creating a packet of some educational and informational materials to leave with the policymaker's office on the subject, particularly if this is a new topic or an issue the policymaker is otherwise unfamiliar with prior to your meeting. Letters you have written on the subject, bulleted fact sheets, brief handouts of your main points, and related agency budget information all may be good things to include in the packet. Plus, having these materials can help prompt talking points during your discussion – you can point to figures and photos on these handouts that help explain the issue and make your points. Be sure to keep any sheets concise and to the point; lengthy handouts are likely to not get read and will not serve your purposes well.

Don't forget to plan your attire for the meeting. Looking professional helps add merit to your arguments and makes you look prepared and well thought out on the issues. Typically, you should plan to wear business formal clothing to the meetings; this might vary a bit depending on the subject and location of the meeting and the level of staff member you are meeting.

What to Expect at the Meeting

Timing. You should plan to arrive at the meeting 5-10 minutes early. If other partners or individuals from your organization are joining in on your meeting, you might consider arriving a little earlier in order to have time to review your “game plan” for the meeting.

Don't be surprised if your meeting begins a little late, particularly in a legislator's office. The staff in these offices are often very busy and have several (10 to 20+) meetings and other events per day. As such, their schedule may fall behind. Along those same lines, don't expect to have a long meeting. These people often need to keep a fairly tight schedule, which might make you

feel rushed. Expect about 15-20 minutes of total time to discuss the issue and make your points, so be concise and clear.

Where you will meet. If going to a meeting in a legislative office, you can likely anticipate meeting in one of several small meeting rooms. Depending on the time of year and legislative calendar, the office may become overbooked; in that case, don't be surprised to find your meeting taking place in the hallway or on the couch in the receptionist area.

In an agency meeting, you can anticipate meeting in a conference room or at a table in a private office.

Who you will meet. It is unlikely you will meet directly with the policymaker. When meeting with a legislative office, your meeting will likely be placed on the schedule of a staffer in charge of that subject matter. In an agency, you might meet with mid-level or operational managers or other assistants. Don't let this disappoint or discourage you – these are very competent people who work on these issues every day - and don't underestimate the power of a policymaker's staff to influence actions and bring attention to an issue.

Discussion content. Expect the discussion to be friendly and respectful, and do your best to keep it that way. You should plan to provide a solid background on the subject– don't overestimate what the policymaker or their staff may know about the specifics of the issue.

You can likely expect the office to avoid taking any real stance on the issue, particularly if this is a new subject to them. They will want a chance to become more informed on the subject and will resist taking a specific stance.

Meeting Process

When you enter an office for a meeting, introduce yourself to the receptionist and let them know you are there for a scheduled meeting with person X. If you have a business card, plan to give it to them – they keep this in their records of the meeting and it allows the receptionist to remind the staff who they are meeting.

At the start of the actual meeting, be sure to introduce yourself and let them know you are there representing your TWS Section or Chapter. Remind them what you wanted to discuss during this meeting. If you brought a packet of information along with you, don't give it to them at the start of the meeting - they might start reading through this information instead of listening to you. Instead, hand them individual sheets of information out of the packet as you discuss the information. This will help emphasize your points and keep them focused on the specific topic you are discussing at the time.

If this is your first meeting with a legislative office, you might make the focus be simply an introduction of who you are (a TWS Subunit), what your organization's mission is, and what sort of specific issues your TWS Subunit is concerned about. Make them aware that your organization exists and offer yourself up as a resource for issues related to wildlife; provide a few examples of issues with which you could assist. You can lead that introduction into arranging a future meeting regarding a specific topic you wish to discuss.

Keep small talk and tangential chit-chat to a minimum. Time during the meeting is valuable, and you don't want to waste it getting side-tracked on other bits of conversation. Keep your discussion to the point, but also friendly. Use this meeting to build your relationship with the office.

When the staffer asks you questions you don't know the answer to, do not provide an answer! Simply let them know you are uncertain of the answer and commit to getting back to them after you have confirmed the facts. This shows that you are dedicated to the proper facts of the situation and gives you an opportunity to connect with the office again regarding your issue – more connections and communication about an issue likely translates into more potential for action.

Provide specific solutions to an issue, where possible. Offer draft language to revise legislation, provide reasons for budget increases, outline ways the agency should change its policies to improve wildlife management

Delivery of your “Ask”

Your meeting likely has an end goal – you want a commitment of support from the individual regarding a certain policy. Near the end of your discussion, it might be appropriate for you to ask a question like, “*Can I count on you to support this issue?*” Politely press for a commitment, unless they are clearly against the issue.

Ending the Meeting

When the meeting is ending, shake hands and thank the individual for their time. Express your desire to have their (continued) support and how you look forward to connecting with them in the future to further wildlife policy issues (if applicable). Leave them the materials you brought with you along with your contact information and be sure to collect their contact information. Offer yourself as a resource for them on issues related to wildlife conservation. Re-emphasize that you will be in touch with them regarding any unanswered questions they may have had.

Follow-up

In the next day or two after your meeting, send an email directly to the person you met. In the email, thank them again for taking the time to meet with you to discuss issue X. Then remind them of your main points in the issue, and again make yourself available as a resource for them.

The follow-up email is also a good time to send them additional information on the subject. You can attach files or send links that will provide them with more in-depth information on the topic.

Consider arranging a field trip for the legislator or staffers you met to give them a first-hand look at wildlife and natural resource conservation efforts on the ground. Trips to National Wildlife Refuges, wildlife management units, state forests, or other natural areas where wildlife professionals work will help them develop a better understanding and personal connection to the issue. This may increase your chances of success.