



5.1 THE STATE & FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE PROCESS AND HOW YOU CAN BECOME INVOLVED

Your advocacy efforts are key to helping shape both state and federal laws and budgets. There are many points in the legislative process at which you can become involved - from the drafting and introduction of a bill to its passage and enactment into law. The importance of getting involved cannot be overstated; most state legislators know very little about wildlife related issues and the impact their policies can have on wildlife conservation and wildlife professionals. They have much to learn from you as a wildlife professional intimately familiar with the issues.

The following is a summary of the typical legislative process for bills and suggestions on how you can become more involved in the process at each step. The legislative process is structurally similar at both the state and federal level, with the exception that the process ends with either the President (federal) or the Governor (state).

Please note there is some variation in the legislative process from state to state. Every state legislature has a web site with information about the legislative process in that state.

1. Bill Drafting:

A legislator must sponsor a bill in order for it to be drafted by the legislative council. Legislators often work with advocates to craft the language that will be included in legislation or to draft amendments to a bill that has already been introduced. This type of partnership is most common and successful when advocates have an existing relationship with a legislator.

Getting Involved:

Advocates can go to a friendly legislator and request that a bill be drafted to fund programs or projects, address a problem, change policy, etc. Advocates can also work with legislators to influence proposed or existing bill language.

2. Bill Introduction:

When bills are formally introduced, they are assigned a bill number and referred to committee(s). Generally, bills can be introduced in either chamber (House or Senate).

Visit your state or the federal legislature's website to learn more about which bills are currently being introduced (See Appendix). Once you access the website you can find a specific bill using the bill's assigned number or text in the bill. You can also find out to which committee(s) it has been referred.

Getting Involved:

When favorable legislation is introduced, advocates can issue a press release and/or write letters applauding the bill's introduction. Legislators appreciate public acknowledgment of their work, especially when it comes from constituents and is shared with others in their district.

If unfavorable legislation is introduced, it is better to submit your suggested changes to the bill once it is in committee – see next step.

3. Bills Referred to Committee(s) of Jurisdiction

Most of the work done on a bill happens in committee; *this is the most common and effective stage at which to take action on the proposed bill*. Committee Chairs and Ranking Members decide which bills will receive the most attention. Committees may hold hearings on a bill, propose and adopt amendments, and vote on approval of a bill—or they can let a bill die by failing to take any action. If a bill is voted on and approved at the committee level, it is reported out to the full chamber for consideration. For hearings, advocates may be asked to suggest witnesses and may be asked to provide witness testimony.

Getting Involved:

A common and effective way to influence the content of a bill is to write a letter to the appropriate committee while the bill is under consideration. (See Section 3.3) You may also consider meeting directly with committee members, especially those who serve in important or influential roles on the committee. In person meetings can be very effective at expressing your position and hearing feedback from the member and their staff on the proposed legislation.

Advocates may also write to committee members and encourage a hearing on a bill that is important to them. Advocates may prepare oral and/or written testimony to deliver at hearings. Advocates may also provide suggested questions or comments for a friendly legislator on the committee to ask of witnesses. It is also important to recruit fellow advocates or allies to attend hearings on wildlife related budgets and key legislation to show support.

4. Floor Action on a Bill

Bills reported out of committee are placed on the House or Senate calendar for debate by the full chamber. Legislators that support and oppose a bill are given a chance to speak about the bill during the debate. A bill may or may not be placed on the calendar by the chamber leadership, which would mean no action would be taken on the bill and it is effectively dead. When debate concludes, a vote is taken to either approve or defeat a bill.

Getting Involved:

Advocates have the opportunity to contact key legislators in advance of a floor vote to ask them to speak either in favor of or in opposition to a bill. Advocates may provide talking points or even draft and distribute a very brief “floor letter” outlining key points.

5. Conference Committee

Sometimes similar, but not identical, bills pass in the House and Senate. When this happens, a conference committee must be formed to reconcile the differences in the bills. Once differences are resolved, the House and Senate must again vote to approve the modified legislation.

Getting Involved:

Advocates may petition legislative leadership to appoint friendly legislators to the conference committee.

6. Action by the Governor/President

When a Governor/President receives a bill, they may sign the bill into law; veto the bill, or veto and send it back to the legislature with suggestions for reconsideration; or take no action (in some states that will lead to the bill becoming law after a specific period of time). If the Governor/President vetoes a bill, the legislature may override that decision, typically by a two-thirds vote in both the House and Senate.

Getting Involved:

Bills for which the Governor/President signals some reluctance about signing, advocates may write letters or op-eds and/or issue a press release to help sway the decision. When an important, favorable bill is signed into law, advocates may issue a press release and have members attend a signing ceremony, if one is held. This helps build goodwill and generates positive publicity for elected officials.