

Where to start with science and policy?

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Science and legislation are not independent lines traveling in parallel to each other, but instead are intertwined, tangled, and often interdependent. As wildlife scientists, we recognize the importance of science to both our everyday lives and to managing wildlife, and the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation further underscores the role of science in wildlife policy. Ensuring that wildlife policy is based on evidence requires the active engagement of scientists who work with wildlife in the political process, even though it admittedly can be uncomfortable.

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome is knowing where to start. Over the past few years, I have been working to identify how I can plug in to help promote evidence-based legislation and policies relate to wildlife. I'm here to share a few small tips on how you can get started.

First, figure out the lay of the land, and identify spaces where you might be able to have an impact. Simply observing activities in committees at the local, state, and federal levels is helpful to engaging with policy and legislation! At the local level, city councils and municipal committees consider a wide array of wildlife and environmental topics. Check out the minutes from city council meetings to see whether they're discussing wildlife-related issues, and consider reaching out to them if they are overlooking important issues. At the state level, the [Travel, Recreation, Wildlife and Cultural Resources committee](#), often shortened to TRW, is a great place to identify what wildlife-related topics are being considered. At the federal level, Representative Liz Cheney serves on the [Natural Resources Committee](#) in the House of Representatives and Senator John Barrasso serves on the [Environment and Public Works Committee](#) in the Senate. For committees at the state and federal level, you can subscribe to email listserves that will periodically send updates on what these committees are working on. Once you figure out the lay of the land, there are many different ways to have an impact: help a city council member access peer-reviewed research, funnel information to non-profits, provide testimony on a topic that you've been researching, write a letter to the editor, and more. But at first, it's perfectly acceptable to lay low and learn.

Second, leverage the small-town nature of Wyoming to build relationships. For many of us that live in the least populated state, the lack of people and the small-town feel of the state are appealing. This same small population is part of what makes doing legislative work appealing to me; often it feels like I have a better chance of making a difference in Wyoming than I would in a more populated or less connected state. If you send an email to your city council, there's a good chance they will return your email in a day or two. If you call your state representatives, there's a good chance you'll end up at the voicemail on their personal cell phone or they would agree to get a cup of coffee with you. If you're in Washington, D.C., there's a good chance you'll be able to meet face-to-face with all of our Congressional delegation. I'm speaking from experience with all of these examples, which speaks to how accessible our legislature is. If you don't know who your legislators are, you can [easily find out](#)! In addition to directly reaching out to

legislators, you can build connections with non-profits to help them stay up-to-date on emerging science. What non-profits are working on issues that you're familiar with or care about? Identify the person working on that issue, and invite them for a (socially distanced) cup of coffee to figure out whether they could use more support from scientists. Building these relationships can be especially prudent if you are concerned about engaging in the political process in more public ways given your employment situation. Advice to build relationships may sound trite, but relationships are the foundation of getting any legislative or policy work done, and spending time investing in building those connections is an important part of effectively engaging with the political process.

Finally, find a small place to start, and just start there. One of my first policy-related actions was to coauthor a letter to the editor asking people to support the wildlife conservation license plate bill. It was small, but it was a step that offered an opportunity to learn and practice, and it eventually snowballed into more opportunities. The Wildlife Society has an [active policy branch](#), which includes pages and pages of information on how to get involved in policy generally or how to engage on specific issues, such as writing a letter to a legislator about available evidence on a given topic. On their website, you can learn about specific issues and sign letters of support on various wildlife-related topics. If you're still not sure where to start, find somebody who is working at the intersection of science and policy and ask where they could use some help. If you're interested in legislation and policy, we'd love to have you join the Legislative Affairs Committee with WY-TWS! It can feel daunting to get started on working with science and policy, but once you get the ball rolling, you'll realize that there are lots of places that you can plug in.

Connecting wildlife science and policy is a long game, made up of patiently observing the political landscape, building relationships over many years, and working for incremental change. Working towards evidence-based policies requires help from scientists with different skillsets and areas of expertise; it's important work, and we truly need an all-hands-on-deck approach. If you have questions or are interested in identifying ways to engage, please contact Rhiannon Jakopak, Legislative Affairs Committee Chair, at rjakopak@gmail.com.