

# Are Your Elected Officials Hearing Your Voice?

Whether you are concerned about an industry issue on Capitol Hill or in your own state legislature, it's important that you know how to effectively communicate your message.

by *Kindra Gordon*

**O**n the legislative front, the list of issues facing today's farmers and ranchers is lengthy — GIPSA (Grain Inspection, Packers & Stockyards Administration), trade, the death tax, the 2012 Farm Bill, dust and environmental regulations, and animal welfare legislation, to name a few.

While the number of issues can seem overwhelming, and the ability to have your message heard can seem daunting, it might appear easiest to throw your hands up and say I can't make a difference; my message won't be heard.

But another adage should also come to mind: "Your influence counts — but only if you exercise it."

This means becoming informed and involved within your industry and then learning effective ways to communicate your needs and message to your elected officials.

Scott Doyle, president of the Colorado County Clerks Association and County Clerk for Larimer County, shared strategies to do just that when he addressed the American National CattleWomen (ANCW) at their annual convention in early February.

## Relationships count

Doyle's top piece of advice is to develop relationships with legislators.

"If we have a reasonable working relationship with our legislators, or at least know who they are and how to get in touch with them, we will be in a stronger position when we want to support or oppose a piece of legislation that is important to us or if we need to resolve a problem with a government agency or official," he states.

To start building a relationship with key elected officials, Doyle suggests:

Attend an open meeting that legislators have with their constituents. Call the legislator's office in your district to find out

when and where such meetings are held.

Write a letter of introduction. If you send your letter by email, mention in the subject that you are a constituent and include your street address and city or town in the message.

Make an appointment to meet legislators at their offices either in your district or in the Capitol.

Invite legislators to speak to your industry group — or to attend your organization's meetings or tours. Make this an annual invitation. Groups that include more than one district sometimes invite a senator and several representatives.

"Whatever approach is chosen, legislators will be more likely to support good laws if they have had positive encounters with real people, not just statistics," Doyle adds.

John Peterson, who has worked on Capitol Hill for 33 years as a consultant in water, erosion and natural resources public policy, echoes that sentiment.

"Don't underestimate legislators," Peterson says. "With very rare exceptions, they are honest, intelligent, and want to do the right thing. Your role is to inform them on what you think is right."

Peterson underscores the importance of personal visits — in D.C. or in your home state — to build rapport with your Congressional representatives. He says, "While it is always good to come to Washington and visit your elected official on important issues, it is often just as effective, and far less costly, to stop in their home or district office with your issue."

He continues, "I had one member of Congress tell me that if he got calls from his district office, and if four to five people had stopped in with the same issue, he interpreted that as a groundswell of interest on that subject and took note."

Peterson says if you are unable to visit with your elected officials in person, he ranks the best ways to communicate with them as follows:

- 1) a personal phone call with your Member;
- 2) a personal letter faxed to them;
- 3) a personal letter emailed as an attachment;
- 4) a personal phone call with a Member's staff;
- 5) a personal letter mailed — but because all Congressional mail is screened this could take six weeks to arrive; and
- 6) emails.

Peterson says sending "canned" letters and cards composed by others should be viewed as a last resort. He discourages these because he says they are less effective than real-life, personal communication.

## How to share your message

In visiting with elected officials, Peterson suggests focusing your discussion to a handful of priority items — rather than a laundry list of concerns. As a rule, he suggests concentrating on two to three topics while you have your legislator's ear.

Doyle suggests it is always best to contact legislators to share ideas and concerns about legislation or finding a bill sponsor prior to the Legislature convening. But he recognizes that isn't always possible, particularly when

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## Technology and the legislative process

In this new era of communication, Scott Doyle, president of the Colorado County Clerks Association, acknowledges that technology can help attain success in the legislative process.

As an example, he says creation of a website providing background on and message points for the bill may help inform others and inspire them to contact legislators, as well. Doyle says an online petition and instructions on how to contact legislators may be a part of your site.

As a means to drive people to the website and the action items included there, you may also consider creation of a Facebook page or Twitter account to create more awareness for the bill.

Fact sheets, press releases and editorials can also be effective in conveying messages to the public and public officials.

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bills that start out in the right direction sometimes go astray.

But don't let one phone call or visit be the extent of your relationship building.

"One phone call or visit is not enough," Peterson says. "Stay on top of developments relating to your issues so that when new and relevant information becomes available, you can pass it along."

Doyle adds, "When you hear about a bill relating to a topic that concerns you, or you have other needs, it is time to act."

Both Doyle and Peterson emphasize that your first step should be to make sure you have accurate information about the bill and what it will and will not do.

Also, make certain that you understand if it is a topic pertinent to state or federal jurisdiction. For instance, Doyle points out that the role of the federal government in education is very limited; the vast majority of laws concerning education are passed by state legislatures.

"Do not act quickly on the basis of rumors or scanty information, even if you hear there is a legislative emergency. Take time to make sure the information you have received is accurate and it comes from a reliable source. If possible, get a copy of the bill. Read and

interpret the bill yourself and discuss it with others," he suggests.

Likewise, Peterson says, "Never meet with legislators to advocate a position without first mastering all the facts on it, and the arguments for and against. You must demonstrate, through tangible evidence supported by facts, that a particular action is both desirable and justified. Couch your arguments in long-term investments. Discuss cost effectiveness and efficiency."

Doyle also advises checking with others in your district to be sure you are working together and not at cross purposes.

When you are confident that you have accurate information about the bill and know where you stand on the issues involved, contact your legislators. Doyle offers these guidelines:

- ▶ In writing, you can begin by identifying yourself, your work, community, position, etc.
- ▶ State your concern or request, identifying the bill by number and general subject.
- ▶ Thank your legislators for any previous help.
- ▶ Briefly and factually state the main arguments to support your position.

Choose arguments that your legislator is most likely to agree with, even if they are not the most important points to you.

- ▶ It is fine to indicate how the bill would affect your family, but even better if you can indicate how it would affect others, as well.
- ▶ Do not use exaggerated or misleading information.
- ▶ Ask your legislators to tell you their views on the bill in question and to notify you when a hearing is scheduled (but also keep up with this yourself).
- ▶ Close with a note of thanks and your full name and postal address.
- ▶ If you use email, always mention in the subject that you are a constituent and include your street address and city or town in the message.

"Assume that your letter will be read and acted upon," Doyle adds. "Be reasonable and courteous, and do not use threats. If your legislators respond favorably, send a letter of appreciation."

If you prefer to talk with your legislators, you can call their offices. Plan your call before you dial by listing the issues you want to cover and rehearsing if you like. When you

call, identify yourself. If your legislators are busy or not available, you may talk with an aide, which is fine. Be friendly and courteous. Give the specific reason for your call, and say you would like your legislator to work for (or against) the bill.

Doyle emphasizes the importance of staying focused on facts.

“If your legislators or their aides disagree, listen carefully to determine their real objection,” he says. “Explore disagreements, but don’t argue. If they ask a question you can’t answer, offer to find out and call back. Ask your legislators if they will work and vote for (or against) the bill. Close with a thank you.”

### Do’s & don’ts

As you interact with elected officials and become more involved in the political process, Peterson says there are always some guidelines to keep top of mind. He suggests:

**Do** be understanding. Put yourself in the legislator’s place. Try to understand their constituent’s positions, their outlooks, and their goals. Then you are more likely to persuade them to adopt your position.

**Do** be practical. Recognize that each legislator has commitments — and there are constituents who have a different position on your issue.

“**Don’t** unduly chastise a legislator if they happen to vote against one of your issues,” Peterson says. “This does not mean they have deserted your whole program. Give legislators the benefit of the doubt. They will appreciate and remember that you did.”

**Don’t** expect commitment on the spot. Most legislators are thoughtful and deliberate, and make a point of seeking all sides of an issue before taking a position.

**Do** be a good opponent. Fight issues, not persons. Be ready with alternatives and solutions as well as with criticisms. This is constructive opposition. As well, name calling or derogatory remarks don’t win friends or influence legislation.

**Don’t** assume each legislator is a walking encyclopedia on every pending issue. Each session of Congress or your State Legislature sees thousands of bills introduced and passed. It’s impossible for every legislator to know every bill, chapter and verse.

**Never** break a promise. This is a cardinal rule of politics. If you tell a legislator you will do something, then do it. Keep all commitments and promises in a timely manner.

**Do** learn to evaluate and weigh issues. Many bills introduced “by request” are never intended to become law. So don’t criticize

legislators for bills introduced, and don’t call out the “troops” until you are sure a bill you oppose is serious.

**Don’t** change horses in the middle of the stream. Never leave legislators out on a limb supporting your issue, and then change your position after they have publicly supported a position you asked them to take.

**Do** be realistic. Remember that controversial legislation or regulations usually result in compromise. It has always been so and will always be in our

Constitutional Republic. Compromise is the language of politics.

**Do** be thoughtful. Commend the things your legislators do that you support. They may not even be your main issues. That is the way you would like to be treated. Lawmakers will tell you they get dozens of letters asking them to do something, but very few thanking them for what they have done.

