



Working w/ Legislators, Congressmen & Candidates

Purpose:

It is important that that your local legislators and upcoming candidates are kept informed and educated of your district's successes and of what your district's conservation needs are. More than likely, a supervisor personally knows current legislators and/or candidates. Use that contact to your advantage for the rest of the supervisors to get to know them as well. The best means of this is to meet with them personally.

The opinions of constituents are usually the single most important factor in influencing the vote of a state legislator. They listen when a number of people speak about mutual concerns. Supervisors, as grassroots specialists, are well versed in local natural resource issues, are respected members of the community. It is important to build and maintain these relationships. As a district:

Get Acquainted with Lawmakers.

- Participate in events that are attended by legislators.
- Invite them to attend district board meetings, Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) area meetings or convention, or other district meetings.
- Invite them to attend a conservation tour or other district event.
- Hold a legislative luncheon or breakfast.
- Participate in events sponsored by the MACD.

Keep Legislators Informed

- Include them on mailing list for newsletters, news releases, meeting notices, etc.
- Send them monthly board minutes, long range plans, joint plan of operations, annual reports, budget requests, rehabilitation plans, etc..
- Provide them with pamphlets or brochures about the district.
- Send them letters on key issues or concerns.

See "Tips on Writing (or faxing) a Letter to your Legislator".

- Invite them to your "New Supervisors Workshop".

Phone calls are effective and a fast means of getting your message to them. But, be prepared before you call. Have your key message(s) organized in a few short sentences. If you call about specific legislation, know the proposed Bill Number and Name, so they will know immediately why you are calling.

Visiting with a Legislator or Candidate:

- Use your time wisely.
- Be prepared - Have your key points organized, so that you can get your message across in limited time. Keep it simple.
- Present your issue from the legislator's perspective.
- They will want to know how it will benefit their district, how much it will cost, what will happen if nothing is done, and if there is opposition from other groups or individuals.
- Be clear and specific in what action you are requesting.
- Be prepared to answer questions.
- Have your issue in a written format (one-page fact sheet) to leave with the legislator. It should contain what it is you are asking for and details about project or need including costs and benefits and other pertinent information.
- Leave your name and contact information on written information or business card.
- Be kind, courteous, and friendly to staff, assistants, and receptionists. Many times they are the gatekeeper to contacting the legislator. This is an important person to have a good relationship with.
- Follow up your visit with a note to the legislator, Thanking them for meeting with you and for consideration of your proposal or needs.

Working With U. S. Congressmen

Many of the same tips related to state legislators also apply to working with U. S. Representatives and Senators. But there are a few things that are different. Here are a few additional things districts need to consider when working with Congressmen.

It is important to get acquainted with staffers. It is often easier to get access to them than a Congressman. Plus, staffers do much of the day-to-day work and they need to be informed on issues. Many staffers



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are young and may have limited knowledge about conservation. Some staffers work in the Washington D. C. office, but there are also staffers in field offices in the state.

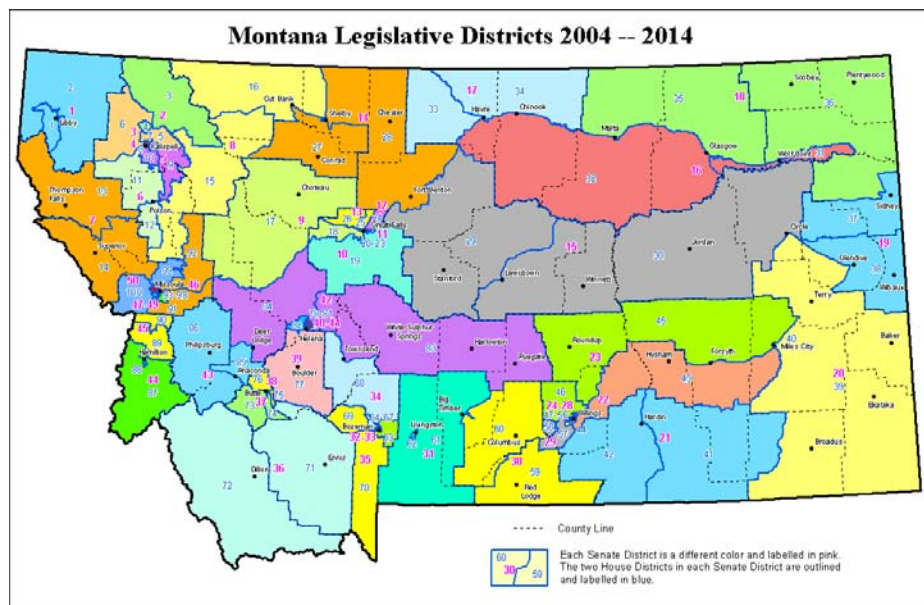
Field office locations can be found on the Congressmen/ Senators' websites. Contacting Congressmen by mail used to be the most effective way to reach them. But today, because of security issues, it can take weeks for a letter to reach their office. If letters are used they should be faxed to their offices (both local and Washington D. C. offices).

Email can be used, but some Congressmen are cautious about opening attachments and some only accept email using the form on their website, which limits the size of messages. Phone calls are still effective.

Congressmen hold town-hall meetings that offer opportunities to express conservation needs or concerns and to get acquainted. This is an excellent opportunity for face time with a Congressman or their field staff. It also keeps conservation issues in the public eye of your community. Don't take for granted that they understand conservation issues.

Important Tips: In most cases you will be much more knowledgeable about conservation than your legislator or Congressman or their staffers. Legislators and Congressmen work for you, so don't hesitate to contact them.

- Be Prepared... Have one supervisor be the spokesperson if a legislator calls for information.
- Be concise on your message.
- Make sure your message is that of the district board and not an individual's issue.
- Have your description/background of your district rehearsed so when you share it, it flows with confidence.
- Publicly recognize legislators for their services and support.
- Encourage your Legislators and Congressmen to call the district office when they have questions about conservation or natural resource issues. They appreciate a constituent "expert" to consult with about matters of special interest.
- When faxing letters, it is best to send from a non-federal fax machine to avoid potential of it looking like the lobbying is coming from a federal agency.
- **Now** is the time of the year to plan ahead and make these contacts. The legislature will be meeting before you know it.



For a current map of house and senate districts, goto www.nris.mt.gov/gis/legislat/legislat.asp