Tips for Making Your Voice Heard
With Government Agencies
by Shirley J. Casey and Kelly Bolton Martin

Many government agencies at all levels are required to seek and accept input from the public and affected parties on proposed regulatory changes. There are usually well-defined procedures that provide the opportunity for public comments before the regulation becomes effective. This is your chance to participate in the decision-making of your government agencies.

You can make significant contributions by learning how the regulatory process works and providing written comments to draft regulations, as well as testifying at hearings when the opportunity arises. The following tips are offered to help make your participation more effective.

Find out when draft regulations are open for comment since that is the optimum time to influence change. Provide written or oral testimony within the deadline!

For written comments:

- Identify who you are, your credentials and/or experience, and, if appropriate, the organization you represent.
- Provide a brief description of how your experience or concern relates to the proposed regulations (i.e., "this proposed policy affects me/my group by . . . ", "this proposal affects wildlife habitat, . . .").
- Be courteous and to the point.
- Be sure the letter is organized and easy to read. If necessary, separate into sections or categories.
- Identify the points of concern in the proposed regulations and the reasons for your specific concerns.
- All comments must be clear, well reasoned, and factual. Do not digress into emotional stories.
- Avoid generalized statements, such "I just don't like it", or "this is a stupid regulation".
- Identify and explain the reasons for the specific concerns (i.e., consequences, costs, values). Try to provide alternative language that is more acceptable. Try to keep suggestions brief, practical, and reasonable.
- When a proposed regulation is unclear, provide clarification. Then comment on the clarification and offer alternatives.
- Since decision-makers may or may not be fully familiar with the activity or impact of regulations, provide enough explanation and substance that they can understand and be persuaded to consider your position.
- Thank them for their consideration. Ask if you will have another opportunity to comment and for a copy of the final version of the policy or regulation. Also ask to be put on the mailing list for that topic and any subsequent notices. Include how to contact you if they have questions (address/phone/fax/email).
- If possible, write what you consider your final draft, wait a day or two, and then re-read. This allows checking on omissions, sequence, content, tone, and errors that might be difficult to spot when it is newly written. It is also useful to get feedback from another reader.
- Consider providing copies to other interested parties (i.e., regulators, other organizations).
- If the letter is faxed or emailed, it is useful to follow with a formal paper copy.

When providing oral comments or testimony in hearings or formal meetings, consider the same steps as listed above, but also:

- Prepare before you appear at the meeting to give your comments!
- Sit down with the proposed regulations as if you were providing written comments and make notes.

- Know when and where to appear. Try to get there early to get the tone of the meeting and in case they start taking testimony early.
- Put forth a professional appearance (i.e., dress, posture).
- Keep testimony impactful and short (it could even be limited to 3-5 minutes).
- Note what decision-makers have heard in earlier testimony. Do not repeat exactly the same thing; put it in your own words.
- Be prepared to respond to questions to your comments. Do not be defensive.
- Try to talk in your own words and stay with your generally prepared points to minimize anxiety.
- If you know that there is a limited time to speak, stay focused.
- Do not allow yourself to sound irrational, hostile or confrontational. This does not mean backing away from points, but staying clear and reasonable.
- If others have disagreed with your position, decide if and how you might want to counter those comments. Continue to be respectful.
- Consider providing copies of your letter or other relevant documents after your talk.
- Presenting testimony is basically giving a speech. Not everyone enjoys or is great at it. Classes are available to help enhance one's skills. If there is a question about one's effectiveness or comfort, keep it very short, ask someone else to do it, or just decide to not testify.

Closing

Providing effective written comments and testimony to regulators can be helpful. Other venues, however, may offer the potential for even greater influence. These activities take considerably more planning, time and effort (Casey). Other avenues for input include: working with agency staff to develop or change the regulations; participating in stakeholder groups; involving and getting help from other constituency groups; personally contacting decision-makers approving the policies; and, occasionally and probably as a last resort, involving the media or litigation. These activities may not be anyone's most favorite, but agencies need our input.

Resources:

Casey, Allan, and Casey, Shirley. "Wildlife Rehabilitators and a State Wildlife Agency: Strengthening a Relationship". *Journal of Wildlife Rehabilitation*, Summer, 1995.

Authors

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