



# ***THE CONGRESS:*** ***The Legislative Process and Your Voice within It***

## **The Legislative Process**

### **The Legislative Branch**

The U.S. Congress is the legislative branch of the federal government, making it the only body with the power to create, amend, and ratify laws. The Congress composed of two separate chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House and the Senate are equal partners in the legislative process and laws cannot be enacted without the consent of both houses (with very few exceptions).

### **Congress at a Glance**

- The House is composed of 435 members, each representing distinct districts
- Representatives serve 2 year terms
- The Senate is composed of 100 members, with 2 senators for all 50 states
- Senators serve 6 year terms

### **A Brief Legislative Glossary**

**Act** – a bill that has been enacted into law after receiving approval from the President

**Bill** – a legislative proposal that will become law if it can pass through the both houses and receive Presidential approval

**Committee** – a subsidiary organization of either the House or the Senate that considers legislation and conducts hearings and investigations within its established jurisdiction

**Committee Report** – prepared by a House or Senate Committee to explain the content of a bill, containing views of the Committee members, a cost impact analysis, and a comparison with current law

**Conference** – a formal meeting, or series of meetings, between House and Senate members for the purpose of reconciling differences between the House and Senate versions of a bill

**Conference Report** – the final version of a bill proposed by the House and Senate conferees that contains a section-by-section explanation of the agreement reached

### **Introduction of a Bill**

Anyone may draft a bill, but only member of Congress may formally introduce legislation. The member of Congress who introduces a bill is referred to as the bill's **sponsor**. The official legislative process begins when a bill is assigned a number – H.R. signifies a House bill and S. signifies a Senate bill – and printed by the Government Printing Office. Bills are then referred to their relevant committee(s)

### **The Committee Process**

Once bills reach committee, they can be considered by the entire committee, or referred to an even smaller subcommittee. Hearings conducted in committees or subcommittees allow administration officials, experts, supporters, and opponents of the bill to have their opinions put on the record. After hearings are completed, the committee or subcommittee may meet to “mark up” the bill and incorporate

changes that reflect recommendations made in hearings. Subcommittee members must vote to have a bill reported to the full committee, and committee members must then vote to have the bill reported to the full House or Senate. If a committee or subcommittee votes not to report the bill to the next legislative step, the bill dies

### **Floor Action**

Bills reported out by committee are scheduled for a floor debate in the house where they originated. Specific rules and procedures govern the amount of time and conditions for the debate of a bill. If a bill passes a full floor vote, it is referred to the other chamber where it follows the same route through committee

### **The Conference Process**

If major differences exist between the House and Senate versions of a bill, a conference committee is convened to iron out the differences between the proposals. If the conference committee is unable to reach an agreement, the bill dies. The final product of a conference committee is the conference report, which must then be passed by both chambers

### **Presidential Approval**

After a bill passes both chambers, it is sent to the President. If the President approves, the bill becomes law. If the President does not approve the proposal and vetoes the bill, Congress may override the veto with a two thirds vote.

## **Communicating With Congress**

### **Effective Communications**

There are a number of ways to communicate with your representative including phone calls, written communications (letters, faxes, and emails), and face-to-face meetings. The communications that are the most effective ask for something specific. The most common requests are to either sponsor or cosponsor legislation, or to vote for or against legislation.

### **The Basics**

It is important to know exactly how to approach your senator or representative in order to clearly and concisely get your message through. First, you must **identify yourself** as a constituent. Asking for too many things clouds your message, so you need to **prioritize your requests** and **be specific**. The first-hand experience you have with the issue is invaluable to staffers who deal with countless complex issues, so **offer to be a resource**.

When you communicate with anyone, it is important to **be polite** and show the same respect that you expect to receive from staffers. You can be forceful about your views without being rude. Finally, **be persistent** because in many cases, you may have to ask more than once before your congressional office responds to your request.

### **Written Communications**

Every letter, fax, and email sent to a congressional office will be read, however the most compelling and effective communications combine a thoughtful approach with a careful explanation of why the issue is important to you. Your correspondence should be sent both to the member and the legislative assistant

assigned to your issue. Information on these staffers can be obtained by simply calling your congressional or committee office. Remember that letters take about three weeks to reach their destination due to security procedures.

When writing to the Speaker of the House or the chair of a committee, address them either as Madam Speaker/Mr. Speaker or Madam Chairwoman/Mr. Chairman.

### **Phone Communications**

If you want to have a substantive discussion about a particular program or policy issue, you can ask for a phone appointment with the staffer who handles that issue. This way, you can be sure that they have set aside time to talk with you, as opposed to chatting with them in the middle of a busy day.

### **Getting a Meeting**

Before you schedule a meeting, have a look at the congressional calendar and decide where you want to meet. Contact the appointment secretary or scheduler about a month before the proposed meeting with a fax including a brief description of what you want to discuss and who will be attending. Remember that meeting requests must always be made in writing.

### **Preparing for a Meeting**

Plan your visit carefully by being clear about what you want to achieve and maintaining correspondence with the member and appropriate staffer leading up to the meeting. Develop a relationship with the staffer, as groups that have good relationships with congressional offices tend to have their voices heard more often. Send a “one-pager” about your program that is brief and concise. Staffers and members do not review materials before meetings; they expect you to brief them. Decide who will deliver your message; powerful figures in the constituent community are best. Supporting materials will also help explain your position more clearly with concrete examples.

### **Conducting a Meeting**

When it is time to sit down for the meeting, limit the number of people you bring as most congressional offices cannot fit more than five people. Be prompt, flexible, and patient. The member or staffer may be late or interrupt a meeting due to other commitments. Make sure you know who’s who in the meeting and take down staffer’s names that you may be dealing with in the future. Be political to reinforce your position in the context of the interests of the member’s constituency. Leave information like position papers behind to reaffirm the substance and goals of your advocacy.

### **Addressing Correspondence**

#### HOUSE

The Honorable (full name)  
(Room #)(Name of) Senate Office Building  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

#### SENATE

The Honorable (full name)  
(Room #)(Name of) House Office Building  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

## **Acknowledgements**

This is part of a series of National Policy Training Materials for Community Forestry Practitioners, prepared through a collaborative effort of American Forests, the Communities Committee, the National Network of Forest Practitioners, and the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, with support from the Ford Foundation.