

Keys to Successful Government Relations



by Troy Fore, ABF Director of Government Relations



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When you set out to influence legislative action – whether in Congress or in your state legislature – you will quickly find that you have a lot of competition.

First, you will have competition for the legislator's attention. There are dozens, even hundreds, of people and organizations

who are also vying for that precious commodity: time. All office-holders have a finite amount of it, even when aided by multiple staff members. Don't waste their time; they will appreciate that.

Second, you will have competition for funding. Funds are in short supply at all levels of government. Budgets are tight and are likely to remain tight for the foreseeable future. Many otherwise worthwhile projects will go unfunded. Projects thought to be safe from budget cuts will be moved to the back burner – if they even stay on the stove. The key to both of these obstacles is preparation.

Build channels of communication with your state and federal legislators. Don't wait until you have a crisis to make contact. You shouldn't be a pest, but you should be in touch with the legislator's office from time to time. With respect to Congress, each member has one of more district or state offices. Start there. Your message will be forwarded to Washington, if appropriate, and that forwarded message will have more weight, since it was reviewed at the local level and found worthwhile. Get the local staffers on your side by giving them the first opportunity to solve your issue. That works better than going straight to Washington, then having the Washington office kick your issue back to the district office. At the same time, never be reluctant to go to the top if you feel you are being ignored.

A major aspect of communication is preparation. Know your legislator. The Internet is a great resource. At www.house.gov and www.senate.gov, you can identify your Congressmen and find links to their official Web sites. State legislators likely have similar Internet resources. You can search the Web for news items about them. Learn their interests and legislative goals. Right now, a good icebreaker would be to be able to make some

comment on the recent election: "congratulations on re-election," "good to have someone from (town, area of state, occupation, or whatever) in office," and so on.

If your legislator is new to Congress or to the state house, let them know something about you and your beekeeping activities. If you represent a group, how many members do you have? Having a new legislator gives you a ready-made opportunity to make a contact; take advantage of it.

If you have a specific issue to relate, be brief, not more than two pages of information (one is better). If they want more, they will ask. Don't let them be blindsided. If there is an opposing view, note that. They will find out anyway and appreciate your candor.

Three things to remember. Once elected, the legislator is YOUR legislator, no matter how you voted. If you are representing a group, the group's goals come first. Above all: never, ever, mislead a legislator or staff member. Abuse that trust and you may never, ever, regain it. If the ABF can help you, let me know.

Editor's Note: If you believe that the ABF is heading in the right direction, please show your support with a donation. At the Annual ABF Business Meeting in Galveston, those present pledged \$16,000 for legislative efforts. If you were not in Galveston, or not at the business meeting, we still need your support. We must energize beekeepers to come together to work collaboratively on the many challenges that we face. In order to move forward, we must ask for your financial support.



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