

Successful Advocacy: Tips for Public Comment

Many people find commenting on public policy issues a daunting task, but commenting is essential to advocating for clean healthy rivers. Consider the tips outlined in this article, to help make the task a little less daunting.

The first step is to identify a specific person to whom you will address your comments, and also coordinate with other organizations who will likely comment and share your views.

The second step is to collect background material on the issue(s) the document addresses. This may include statutes, regulations, agency materials or agency guidance. Review the materials and make a checklist of the issues you want addressed in the document.

The third step is to review the document. Make notes on the following, based on your checklist:

- Issues not addressed or addressed inadequately
- Substantive errors or omissions
- Accuracy
- Consistency with other information

Review your notes for and record major problems and themes. Identify your objective and the main points you want to make in your comments.

The fourth step is to write your comments. Be sure to include a cover letter. The cover letter should do the following:

- Address the letter to a decision maker
- Specifically reference the document you are commenting on and whether you support, oppose or want it changed. If there are alternatives, clearly state which one you support
- Establish your authority to comment
- Reference any pertinent commenting history
- Identify attachments, if any
- For extensive comments, summarize your major concerns

In your comment document:

- Explain how you are affected by the proposed action
- Suggest specific language when possible and appropriate
- Specify what you support as well as what you don't
- Give specific examples
- Provide supplemental information, if needed
- Offer solutions
- Include your contact information and ask for a direct response to your concerns
- Use these organization structures, formats, and styles:
 - Use headings
 - First, offer general comments
 - Second, offer page-by-page comments

- Use topic sentences
- Use short sentences (50 words or fewer)
- Use the active voice
- Do not ask questions
- Be respectful

Also consider these other suggestions:

- To assist you with formulating your own comments, review other people's comments
- If public hearings are taking place, show up to offer your comments verbally
- Meet with the decision maker on the issue. Discuss the points outlined in your comments.
- Meet with the appropriate legislator(s). Discuss the points outlined in your comments. Ask him or her to advocate for your position.
- Meet with the members of the media. Share the points outlined in your comments. Ask them to run a story on your position.

Sources for this article: Wendy L. Wilson, Organizational Development Program Director with River Network, and "The Art of Commenting: How to Influence Environmental Decisionmaking with Effective Comments", by Elizabeth D. Mullin. You can purchase "The Art of Commenting: How to Influence Environmental Decisionmaking with Effective Comments" from the Environmental Law Institute www.eli.org.