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# Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board

## SWCD Directors

## Working in the Legislative Process





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# Working in The Legislative Process

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- The Texas Legislature meets every other year for 140 days.
- District directors can expect many bills to be filed that will affect district operations.
- We need to remember that soil and water conservation programs are at the discretion of the state legislature and U.S. Congress.



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# Working in The Legislative Process

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- Your active involvement in the legislative process may be the difference in the passage or killing of legislation important to your district.
- During the course of a typical legislative session, over 5,000 bills will be filed. Historically, the Association of Texas SWCDS tracks about 300 bills that are of importance to conservation districts.



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# Something to understand...

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- Members of the Texas Legislature and Congress cannot handle the thousands of requests and communications that filter into their offices each day.
- They don't have the time to respond personally to the thousands of phone calls and letters they receive. Therefore, they delegate the work. Staff members read bills in detail, respond to requests from constituents, research bills, speak with the press and, otherwise do all the work legislators would be doing, if only they had the time.



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# Forming Relationships is Crucial

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- Personal knowledge and acquaintances with your local, state, and federal elected officials is where you hit home runs. So ask yourself some important questions.
  1. Do I know the names of my state representatives and senators? U.S. Representatives and Senators? Local officials?
  2. Do I know how and where to contact them at both their district, state and Washington offices?
  3. Do I keep my state and national elected officials informed or invite them to attend district meetings and events on a regular basis?

*[more on next*

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# Forming Relationships is Crucial

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4. Do I find opportunities to talk with my elected officials when they are in their home districts?
  5. Do my state and federal elected officials know my name, the name of our conservation district?
  6. Do I know the name of the elected officials staffers who work in the district, Austin or Washington offices?
  7. Do the staffers know and recognize my name or the name of my district whenever I call?
- If you can answer **yes** to the above questions, then you are on your way to forming a productive relationship with the people who represent your district in Austin and Washington.



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# Inform Your Elected Officials and Keep them Informed!!

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- Let them know what your district is doing and what your needs are. Examples would include personal contacts, letters, newsletters etc. Below are some common sense rules to keep in mind when working with members of the Texas Legislature or U.S. Congress.
  1. Don't underestimate legislators. With very rare exceptions, they are honest, intelligent, and want to do the right thing. Your role is to inform them on the conservation needs of the state of Texas, and in particular, your district.



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# Inform Your Elected Officials and Keep them Informed!!

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2. Be understanding. Put yourself in the legislator's place. Try to understand their constituents' positions, their outlooks and their goals. If they see that you understand and are sympathetic to their political pressures, they will be more apt to working with you.
3. Be practical. Recognize that each legislator has commitments. Don't unduly chastise a legislator if they happen to vote against a conservation program or issue that concerns you. This does not mean they have deserted your whole program. Give legislators the benefit of the doubt. They will appreciate and remember that you did.



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# Tips To Help You



- Keep in mind that thousands of bills are introduced into the Texas Legislature as well as the US Congress. Lawmakers have to somehow deal with every one of them, and many are hundreds of pages long.
1. Be informed. Don't talk without the facts. Never meet with legislators to advocate a position on a state, local or national conservation issue without first knowing all the facts on the issue as well as the arguments for and against. Don't forget there is always another side to the issue. Smoke and mirrors won't do the job in winning a legislator over. You must demonstrate, through tangible evidence supported by facts, that a particular action is both desirable and justified.



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# Tips To Help You

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2. Don't assume that your legislator is a walking encyclopedia on every pending conservation issue. Each session of Congress or the Texas Legislature sees thousands of bills introduced and passed. That's a lot of legislation to read and remember. It's impossible for every legislator to know every bill, chapter and verse.
  
2. Be a good opponent. Fight issues, *not persons*. Be ready with alternatives and solutions as well as with criticisms. This is constructive opposition. Remember, don't run down the opposition. Name calling or derogatory remarks don't win friends and influence legislation.



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# Tips For Establishing Legislative Relationships

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- Your legislator's time is valuable, but he or she appreciates constituent contacts.
  1. Don't expect commitment on the spot. Most legislators are thoughtful and deliberate, who make a point of seeking all sides of an issue before taking a position. So be patient and courteous.
  2. Be reasonable. Recognize that legitimate differences of opinion exist. Never indulge in threats and never convey negative attitudes about politics and politicians. Remember that friends come and go, but enemies accumulate.
  3. Never break a promise. This is a cardinal rule of politics. If you tell a legislator you will do something, then do it. No excuses. Keep your word. Keep all commitments and promises in a timely manner.



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# Tips For Establishing Legislative Relationships

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4. Learn to evaluate and weigh issues relating to soil and water conservation programs. Don't call out the "troops" until you are sure a bill you oppose or support is serious.
5. Be realistic. Remember that controversial legislation or regulations relating to conservation issues usually result in compromise. Like it or not, compromise is the language of politics.
6. Don't burn your bridges when you don't win or if the results you want are not immediately forthcoming. Working with legislators is an investment that may not pay off immediately.



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## Tips for Forming Relationships With Elected Officials

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- **Be thoughtful.** Commend the things your legislators do that you support. They may not even be your main issues. Lawmakers will tell you they get dozens of letters asking them to do something, but very few thanking them for what they have done.



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## Tips for Forming Relationships With Elected Officials

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- **Be friendly.** Don't contact legislators only when you want their help. Invite them to attend your district's meeting when they are back in their district to say "thank you" and discuss issues. Take pains to stay in touch with them throughout the year—every year.



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## Tips for Forming Relationships With Elected Officials

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- **Don't leave.....*never to be heard from again.*** One phone call or visit is not enough. Stay on top of developments relating to soil and water conservation issues so that when new and relevant information becomes available, you can pass it along.



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## Tips for Forming Relationships With Elected Officials

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- **Meeting in person** with elected officials and/or legislative staff is the most effective means of achieving political objectives.



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# Tips for Forming Relationships With Elected Officials

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- **Make an appointment in advance.** Time is always at a premium in legislative offices.
- Contact the legislator's scheduler in advance to arrange a meeting. It is best to make your meeting request in writing and follow up with a phone call.
- Be clear about who will be attending the meeting and the specific reason for the meeting. Legislative schedules are unpredictable so don't be put off if your meeting is rescheduled or if you have to meet with staff in lieu of the elected official.



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# Tips for Forming Relationships With Elected Officials

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- **Do your homework.**
- Prepare carefully and thoroughly for your meeting.
- Develop an agenda that all your participants clearly understand. Know your talking points in advance and be prepared to make your case. Research the opposition's arguments against your position and, if possible, acknowledge and rebut those arguments in your presentation.



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## Tips for Forming Relationships With Elected Officials

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- **Stay "on message."** Effective legislative meetings should be narrow in scope.
- Stick to a single issue, state only a few key points in support of your position and make a definite request for action.
- Many meetings are ineffective because a participant brings up other issues or strays from the key arguments supporting your position.



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## Tips for Successful Legislative Meetings

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- **Go local.** Your effectiveness is based on the fact that your legislator wants to hear your thoughts and opinions because you are a constituent.
- One of your most useful strategies is to relate the issue and your position to your community.
- Legislators have many other avenues to get national or state analysis, reports and statistics on soil and water conservation issues.
- Don't be afraid to humanize the issue by relating it to your local community or personal experience.



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# Tips for Successful Legislative Meetings

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- **Make a clear, actionable request.** Many people are afraid that it's impolite to make a direct request. But, don't forget that the purpose of your meeting is to secure support for your conservation issue.
- It is appropriate and expected that you will make a request at your meeting. The key is to make sure that your request is clearly articulated and actionable by the legislator.
- Keep in mind that your request should be timely and consistent with the legislative process. You should make reference to bill number/s if known, and be knowledgeable about the status of the bill. Making a specific request gives you the opportunity to evaluate the legislator's response.



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# Tips for Successful Legislative Meetings

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- **Follow up.** What happens after a meeting is almost as important as the meeting itself.
- Send a “thank you” letter after the meeting that not only expresses appreciation, but reinforces your message and any verbal commitment of support made by the legislator or staff.
- If you promise during the meeting to get back in touch with additional information, be sure that you do so. Failure to follow up on your promise will call your credibility into question.



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## Tips for Successful Legislative Meetings

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- **Don't forget to report the results of your meeting back to your TSSWCB field representative.**
- This information is vital to coordinating overall legislative strategy by the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board and Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts.
- Remember, follow-up is important even if the legislator does not agree to support your request because you are building a long-term relationship.



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# Working With Elected Officials

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- **Know Your State Legislative Committees That Affect District Conservation Programs**

## Texas House of Representatives

- Agriculture & Livestock
- Appropriations
- Environmental Regulation
- Land & Resource Management
- Natural Resources



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# Working With Elected Officials

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## Texas Senate

- Finance
  - Government Organization
  - Natural Resources (Subcommittee on Agriculture and Coastal Resources)
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- The above committees are examples in which the legislative process in state government impacts conservation district programs. There are others as well, but the actions of these committees have direct impact on your programs.



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# Working With Elected Officials

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- **You Should Also Know Your Federal Legislative Committees That Affect District Conservation Programs**
- On the Federal side here are key congressional committees whose work which should be of constant interest to conservation district officials.
  - United States House of Representatives:
    - » Committee on Agriculture
    - » Committee on Appropriations
    - » Committee on the Budget
    - » Committee on Resources
    - » Committee on Ways and Means



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# Working With Elected Officials

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## –United States Senate:

- » Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
- » Appropriations
- » Budget
- » Energy and Natural Resources
- » Environment and Public Works

- As you can see, it takes a lot of vigilance and effort to keep abreast of what goes on at the state and national level. We have to remember that what happens in Austin and Washington affects the programs we administer on the local level.



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# Tips For Public Testimony

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- **During a legislative session it may be necessary for a representative of your district to provide testimony before a specific committee**
- Public Testimony: Length-- Prepare two versions of your testimony: one to deliver verbally and a longer, written version to give to the legislators. Be able to present your testimony in less than five minutes.
- Public Testimony: Style-- It should be typed and you should bring enough copies for the committee members plus additional copies for the press and other interested persons. Be respectful, professional, brief and accurate.





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# Tips for Public Testimony

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- Identify your concerns, and how you think the committee could make improvements to the bill, if appropriate.
- Acknowledge originators of the legislation if you have this information.
- If the legislation is a carefully worked out compromise among several groups, acknowledge this.
- Address each legislator by name. State what you would like to see accomplished. Do this at the end of your testimony.
- Offer to answer questions of the committee. If you do not know the answer to a question, offer to seek a response and follow-up with committee members as soon as possible.



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# Tips for Public Testimony

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- Remain aware of time constraints, but do not hurry through your testimony. Take your time so you will be relaxed and they can listen fully.
- When questioned by committee members, do not be argumentative. Do not lose your temper or your professionalism.
- Do not take their comments personally-- realize that they are simply frustrated, in a hurry, and have to be concerned with hundreds of issues other than the one with which you are concerned.
- Direct replies to all committee members, not only to friendly committee members.
- Offer to assist them and their staff in any way you can to resolve the issue.
- Thank them for their time and consideration of your position.



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# Working With Elected Officials

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## TSSWCB Field Representatives Routinely Visit With State Legislators and Staff

- Role of TSSWCB Field Representatives is to keep abreast of critical issues in Austin and keep SWCDS informed.
- TSSWCB Field Reps convey soil and water conservation district concerns and achievements to state elected officials.
- SWCD Directors should keep in mind that the persons of real influence to state and federal legislators is their constituency. That's **you**, the SWCD director, not your field representative.



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# Cultivate a Relationship With Legislative Staff

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- In a sense legislative aides, or staff might be considered a sort of institutional backbone in state and federal elected official's offices.
- A supportive staff person can often make the difference between success and failure. Staff play an invaluable role in shaping a legislator's agenda and position on issues.
- It is important that you make every effort to cultivate a positive working relationship with staff.
- Over time, legislative staff may even come to regard you as a helpful resource for information on soil and water conservation issues.



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# Cultivate a Relationship With Legislative Staff

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- **Let's consider for a moment how legislative staff spend their time:**
  - Briefing legislators on policy issues
  - Attending committee meetings and preparing reports of proceedings
  - Speaking with lobbyists, constituents, and members of the press to gather and provide information on behalf of legislators
  - Lining up support for legislation and negotiating with staff in other offices about provisions in bills
  - Answering letters, helping constituents resolve problems or finding information requested by constituents



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- **Number 10: But I thought my appointment was with Representative or Senator!**
- Never, ever, indicate that you are disappointed to be meeting with a staff person. In Austin or on Capitol Hill, having a good relationship with a staff person can make or break your cause.



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- **Number 9: Here's some reading material for you—our 300-page annual report.**
- When meeting with a member of the Texas Legislature or Congress or staff person, try to limit your leave behind materials to one or two pages. Offering the information in a file folder with your district's name on the label will also help ensure that the materials are put in a file drawer, as opposed to the round file.



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- **Number 8: How much of a campaign contribution did your boss get to vote against (or for) this bill?**
- Believe it or not, most staff have no idea who contributed to their boss' campaigns. Not only is this question insulting, but even if it were accurate, the staff person isn't likely to know.



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- **Number 7: I assume you know all about HR 1234.**
- With thousands of bills being introduced during each state legislative session and in Congress, no staff person will be able to keep them all straight. Always provide information on the bill title, number and general provisions when communicating with a legislative or Congressional office.



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- **Number 6: No, I don't have an appointment, but I promise I'll only take half an hour of your time.**
- Unless it's an emergency, or you are good friends with the staff person, try not to engage in the dreaded "stop by." Most staff are happy to try to set up a meeting if you are relevant to the office (i.e., you are a constituent). And even if you have an appointment, never expect a half hour.



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- **Number 5: No, I don't really need anything specific.**
- If you don't ask for something, a bill, a meeting in the district, whatever, some staff will wonder why you came by. Updates on conservation issues are fine, so long as they are accompanied by a request. That will ensure that someone in the office thinks about you and your request for longer than five minutes.



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- **Number 4: We have ten (or more) people in our group.**
- State legislative and Congressional offices are tiny. If you have more than five people in your group, you'll be standing out in the hallway. Plus, having so many people talking at once can dilute the impact of your message. Try to limit your group to no more than five.



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- **Number 3: What you're telling me can't be right. I heard (Jay Leno) say otherwise.**
- Most staff, or members for that matter, won't lie to you. They know that lying will get them in big trouble. Sometimes, they may see things differently than you do, but if they say a bill definitely is not going to be considered on the floor, or if there is no such legislation, I'd believe them.



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- Number 2: What do you mean we have to stand in the hall?
- See number 4. A request to meet in the hallway is simply an indication of space limitations. Nothing else.



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# The Top Ten Things Legislative Staff Hate to Hear

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- **Number 1: No, I don't represent anyone from your district. I just thought you'd be interested in what I have to say.**
- Constituents always come first. Members are elected to represent their constituents. Period. If you are not their constituent, you are not relevant to them. Your time is always best spent working with your own elected official and turning them into an advocate for soil and water conservation programs.



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# Become Active with the Association of Texas SWCD'S "Committee of 100"

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- Working with the Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation District's "Committee of 100" provides a platform for a **collective unified voice** on conservation issues.



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# Use Your Local Contacts- Communication is the Key

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- Get to know personally your county commissioners judges, mayors etc.
- Divvy up responsibilities among your SWCD board members and have someone designated to attend and participate in their meetings.



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# Use Your Local Contacts- Communication is the Key

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- Invite local officials to attend your meetings. (Put them on your meeting agenda. If the individual cannot be there ask them to send a representative.
- Invite them to your awards programs, banquets, tours etc. Give them a role on the program i.e., (Master of Ceremonies, giving the welcome)
- Invite your local officials to share political issues. Give them the opportunity to discuss local issues and concerns. Let them hear from your SWCD board about issues of mutual concern.



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## Invite your State and Federal Elected Officials to Attend the Annual Meeting of Soil and Water Conservation District Directors

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- The annual meeting draws a crowd. Elected officials like to participate in large gatherings.
- Most importantly, the state meeting provides an opportunity for state and federal elected officials to learn about the issues and programs that affect conservation districts at the local level.



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## Coordinate With Neighboring SWCDS on Cultivating Legislative Relationships

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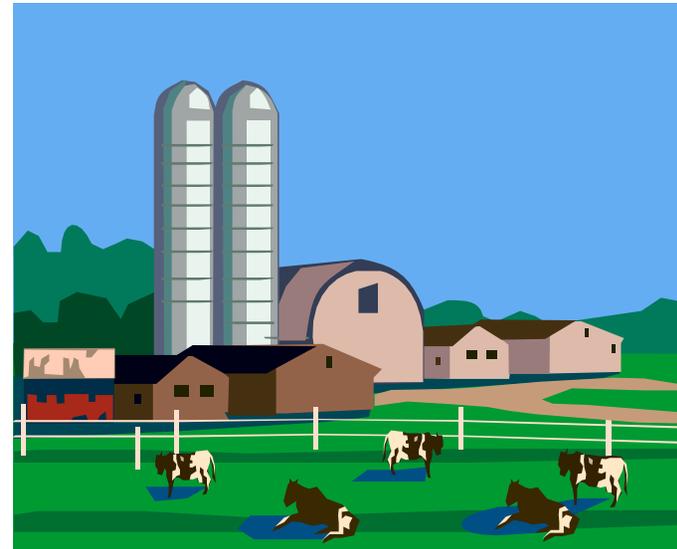
- Work with your neighboring SWCDS to develop legislative relationships, especially if the elected official's district is shared by several SWCDS.



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# Special SWCD Events

- Invite local, state, and federal elected officials on district tours to let them see first hand how state and federal funded conservation programs are being implemented within you SWCD.
- Remember!! They appropriate the money so they are interested in the benefits derived from those appropriations. Some good local success stories would put the icing on the cake.





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## Legislative Off-Years Provide Opportunities, Opportunities, Opportunities

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- The Texas Legislature meets every two years. Use the off year when the Legislature is not in session to cultivate relationships. During the regular session legislative official's attention is divided.



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# Working With Elected Officials

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- Work around their schedules. Remember that state senators and representatives have constituents with many needs and interests as well as special interest groups pulling on their sleeves.
- Be sensitive to party affiliations. Leave that at home. You want the elected official working with you, not against you.



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# Working With Elected Officials

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## “Thank You”

It's only two words, but what a difference they make!!

- After visiting with an elected official, always send a thank you either by way of a personal phone call or a card or letter. Do this whether the elected official is able to help you or not. It is just common courtesy and in the long run may pay dividends.
- Speaking of written communication– Handwritten letters seem to get an elected official's attention simply because there seems to be a more personal touch to it. Form letters get the least attention.