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Writing letters remains good way to reach officials



Letter writing is one of the most effective and important tools that any citizens have at their disposal. An informed and up-to-date letter to your representative in Congress, or to your local city council member, is a great way to influence decisions about issues that effect you and your environment.

While most local officials will read and respond to the letters that you send them, state and federal politicians rarely read their mail personally. However, that doesn't mean that writing letters to them isn't worthwhile.

State and federal politicians have aides who read letters from constituents and report back to the politicians about the opinions of people in their districts. Since only a few people take the time to write a letter, the letters that are received are used to estimate the number of constituents in the district with similar opinions. So, your letter supporting full funding of the Wetlands Reserve Program

might be interpreted as representing the opinion of 300 constituents.

Letter writing can also be effective when dealing with corporations. Letters from concerned consumers convinced McDonald's to stop using foam containers. The consumers who wrote to Starkist Tuna were able to persuade the company to use only tuna that is harvested in a "dolphin-safe" manner.

Both the Missouri General Assembly and the U.S. Congress began their new sessions last week. These legislators are interested in hearing what you want; you are their ticket to re-election. But they can't carry out your wishes if they don't know what you are thinking.

Even if you are not the world's leading expert or a great writer, you can write an effective letter. Here are a few tips.

- Be brief — not more than one page — and to the point. Attach news clippings or fact sheets, if appropriate.
- Letters do not need to be typed, but

must be neat and legible. Include your full name, address and phone number in the upper right corner, and mention that you look forward to a prompt response.

■ Focus on one topic only, stating the issue and your opinion in the first paragraph. Back up your stance with personal experience and facts.

■ Counter arguments by the other side.

■ Choose your own words. Don't copy catch phrases from organizations; letters seen to be inspired by organizations are generally not as effective.

■ Ask for a specific position.

■ Ask the person to whom you are writing to publicly state his or her opinion and to speak personally with state officials and citizens to devise alternatives.

■ Recommend a course of action. Give advice on how to change things for the better. If you are writing to a legislator and you know the number of the bill you're supporting, mention you'd like to see them sign on as co-sponsors. The more co-sponsors a bill has, the faster it will get out of committee.

■ Be accurate and truthful.

Anyone can write effective letters with a little time and thought. So, the next time you find yourself complaining that nothing is being done

about an issue that you care about, why not write to the people who are paid to represent your interests and tell them what should be done?

The Conservation Federation of Missouri publishes the Missouri Legislative Report, which is published every week while the Missouri General Assembly is in session — January through May. This publication reports on all the conservation bills in the Missouri General Assembly and costs only \$12. For subscription information write the Missouri Conservation Report, Conservation Federation of Missouri, 728 W. Main St., Jefferson City, Mo., 65101-1534, or call 1-634-2322.

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