



## **Civic Engagement for a Fair and Full Farm Bill: A Guide to In-Person Meetings with Your Congressional and State Representatives**

During the GOAT (Getting Our Act Together) Process, we provide you with opportunities to develop and align with groups across the nation that stand united for a Full and Fair Farm Bill. But one of the best things *you* can do is have an in-person meeting with your Congressional representatives. Meeting your Congressperson at his/her home office, as opposed to at his/her DC office, is known as an *in-district meeting*.

Congress is on recess **until September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013**. That means **now is the optimal time to contact your elected official** for an in-district meeting to emphasize the importance of a Full and Fair Farm Bill. You can do this two ways:

- Stop by the Congressperson's office and drop off the talking points and the [organizational sign-on letter](#) (signed-on by 340 + organizations) that outlines equity and justice throughout the titles of the Farm Bill.
- You can also use the instructions below to schedule a formal meeting with your congressional representatives. If you haven't had a formal meeting, we urge you to take this opportunity to do so.

### **Why do in-district meetings matter?**

Congressional representatives care about what their constituents have to say; after all, constituents are their bosses! And in-district meetings are particularly important. **Every in-person meeting has an exponentially bigger impact than a letter or email may alone.** It engages them in a way no other form of communication can.

### **What's an in-district meeting?**

Senators and Representatives don't spend all their time in Washington; they also head home to visit with their families and constituents. This happens frequently -- in fact, Congress is only in D.C. [about 137](#) days per year. When they aren't in D.C., they're at home - and you can go visit them! You can either schedule a meeting with your elected leaders in person or engage them in a public event, like a town hall meeting or fundraising event. If you don't have time for either, just stop by and drop off the sign on letter, informational sheets or talking points you may have available on the subject. Asking for the contact information of the agricultural legislative assistant is also useful as you may direct future messages to her/him as well as the Representative.

### **When can I catch my Senators and Representative at home?**

Congress is in recess from August 5<sup>th</sup> – September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013. You can see the Senate's full schedule for 2013 [here](#) and the House's [here](#).



## How do I schedule an in-district meeting?

There are two ways to meet your representatives in person. The first way is to find a public event during which they'll be taking questions from the audience; an Internet search with your representative's name and "townhall meeting" as keywords in the search box can help you identify some locations and dates. Alternatively, you can schedule an in-person meeting, which means you should:

1. **Find out who schedules in-district meetings.** You need to request the meeting. Meeting with a representative is great, but meeting with a staffer is also good. You'll want to call the member's office in D.C. (try the switchboard at 202-224-3121 or look the number up [here](#)) and find out who handles scheduling of in-district meetings.
2. **Send the scheduler a letter.** Address the letter to the person from step one. The best way to do this is **faxing** the letter (use directories services [here](#) or [here](#)), but you can also try mailing a letter. (Don't have a fax machine? Look at some options by doing an internet search for an email-to-fax service.) Explain in your letter that you are a constituent and describe what issue concerns you (including the Farm Bill as starting ground). It's also helpful to mention specific dates you'd like to meet.

**The appointment request should be short and simple. Consider using the following template:**

[Your Address] [Date]

The Honorable [full name] U.S. Senate (or U.S. House of Representatives) Washington, DC 20510 (20515 for House)

Dear Senator (or Representative) [last name]:

I am writing to request an appointment with you on [date]. I am a member of the [your group, if any] in [your city], and I'm concerned about [issue].

I realize that your schedule is difficult to project at this point, but it would be ideal if we could meet between [time] and [time].

I believe [issue] is important because [1-2 sentences].

My home address is [address]. I can also be reached by phone at [phone number] or email at [email address]. I will contact your office during the week of [1-2 weeks before the visit] to confirm the details of the appointment.

Thank you for considering my request to meet with you.

Sincerely,  
[name]

3. **Confirm the recipient received the letter and then follow up.** Be persistent! Every moment you spend on this is worth it. It generally takes just a few phone calls and emails to get this settled.



4. **Confirm the meeting.** Double-check that you have the right address, and be on time – or, even better, a few minutes early! Meetings in Congressional offices are tightly scheduled and you don't want to waste a minute by being late.

## PREPARE FOR THE MEETING

- Plan to discuss no more than two issues. Meetings are scheduled to last from 15 to 45 minutes.
- Bring along copies of the GOAT sign on letters to show that many other groups in many other places agree with what you are saying. Highlight the impact of several of the issues raised in your community.
- Learn everything you can about your issue.
- Learn everything you can about points in opposition to your standpoint and be ready to argue against them.
- If you have any supporting handouts, charts or graphics, bring them with you. Consider taking extra copies in case staff members request them.
- Find out where your legislator stands and has voted on your issue.
- **Bring friends who care about the issue!** The more concerned citizens your elected official sees, the better. Feel free to contact GOAT or Rural Coalition if you are scheduling a meeting, and we'll see if others in your state or district would like to accompany you.

## DURING THE MEETING

- Focus on building a long-term relationship with your legislator and their key staff members.
- Arrive about 10 minutes before the appointment time. At least, be on time. Dress neatly and conservatively. Be courteous and respectful. Relax.
- Do not be upset if you end up meeting with the legislator's staff. They are often more knowledgeable of individual issues than the legislators themselves, and they WILL inform the legislator of your views and requests. Be sure to ask for the contact information of the staff members handling food and agriculture policy for your legislator – most offices are much more willing to share their cards and information at meetings rather than over the phone.
- Introduce yourself to the legislator or their staff members: tell them who you are and where you live and a little about your organization.
- Warm them up: Try to start by complimenting something the legislator has done recently; their vote on an issue, a bill they sponsored, etc. After a minute or two of such "small talk," state your standpoint on the issue(s) you came to discuss. No matter how passionately you feel about the issue, do not "rant-and-rave." Nothing diminishes your credibility more than an "in your face" demeanor. Tip: They know you pay their salary.
- Be ready to answer questions and discuss your points in detail. Be clear and polite in your concerns, and emphasize that you'd like them to represent your concerns on the Hill. See more tips [here](#).



- If the legislator disagrees with you, stand up for yourself, debate the issues, but do not become over-argumentative. Keep trying to emphasize the positives of your standpoint. Always try to end the conversation on a positive note.

Remember: be persistent! *This meeting is worth every moment of time you put into it!*

## **AFTER THE MEETING**

- Every participant should immediately write an individual thank-you note to the member of Congress and any staff member present during the meeting. Be sure to express your appreciation to any of the member's staff that was involved in scheduling or facilitating the meeting. Send this note by mail, but also by email, as this will open a connection for the future. Sending electronic copies of what you handed them also makes their job easier as they communicate between the home offices and DC.
- If the legislator has offered to introduce an amendment or other legislation, work with his/her staff in the development of the legislation and provide them with a model (see Oregon and Pennsylvania's legislation for CNS). Ensure that there is precise detail on the requirements for the CNS to be recognized and don't leave the detail to the regulatory agency, such as the Board of Nursing. Your GOAT colleagues would be very willing to assist you in the development of legislation.
- After the bill is crafted, do not share with outsiders of CNSs, and legislators until it is introduced. It is possible those with not the same views may try to prevent the bill from being introduced.

### **But....that seems like a lot of effort. Can't I just tweet about it?**

We *want* you to tweet. For example, start following your Representative and two Senators on twitter and mention them and your meetings in your tweets, with special focus on any thanks you can offer to them.

Don't neglect calling their offices as well – either in DC or in your district or state. Find out the name of the person who handles agriculture and food issues, and get to know them.

Tweet, post to Facebook, call their offices, send emails, make videos, write editorials to your local newspapers, talk to your friends - it all helps. But when it comes to changing the opinions of your congressional representatives, there's nothing like an in-district meeting.

### **But I'm nobody special. Why would they listen to me?**

*Au contraire!* You are a taxpayer and a constituent! You are the reason these elected officials are in office - you are the boss. All Congressional offices keep a running tally of phone calls on every issue and share them weekly with their field offices. Many times, what they consider a flood of calls on an issue may be less than 10 calls. Many offices closely follow twitter as well.

### **Let us know about the meeting!**



If you are going to meet with a representative, then please let us know! Send an email to [angela@ruralco.org](mailto:angela@ruralco.org) and/or [jgill@cafoodjustice.org](mailto:jgill@cafoodjustice.org). We'll be happy to help you formulate your arguments and we'd love to hear how it went.

*This instructional sheet was prepared and circulated by the groups who regularly participate in the "Getting Our Act Together (GOAT) on the Farm Bill" Collaboration, which promotes a fair farm bill with equity and sustainability.*