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Making Your Views Known

On Food, Agricultural, and Community Issues

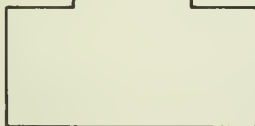
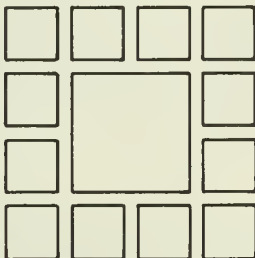
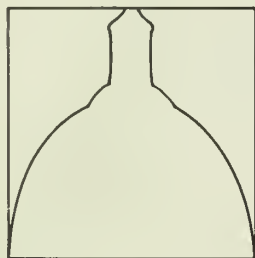
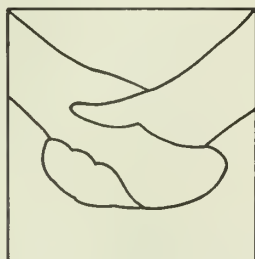
Harold D. Guither

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North Central Regional
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This circular was prepared by Harold D. Guither, Extension Economist, Public Policy, and Professor of Agricultural Economics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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Making Your Views Known

On Food, Agricultural, and Community Issues

Harold D. Guither

During the past 50 years, our government has become increasingly involved in problems concerning agriculture, food, the environment, and rural community living. As a result, farmers, homemakers, and consumers, especially those directly affected by government actions, have felt an increasing need to make their views known to local, state, and federal officials. In doing so, they are exercising their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a representative form of government.

This publication suggests ways by which you can express more effectively your views about public issues on which some form of government decision will be made.

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Belong to an Organization

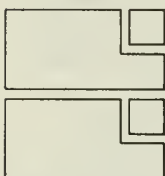
Legislators and government officials will listen to individuals. In our type of government, however, organizations that represent hundreds or thousands of members with a single purpose or point of view have more influence on policy decisions.

One strength of an organization is its ability to mobilize people into state and local groups that can express their common views on an issue and convey their concerns to those legislators and government officials who will decide the issue.

Some small groups in Washington sponsor professional lobbyists, people whose job it is to attempt to influence Congress and government officials. These groups hold strong opinions on certain issues. Primarily, however, they represent their own interests. Members of

Congress may listen politely to such people but are more likely to base their decisions on the views of organizations having large, active memberships.

To communicate your views effectively through an organization, you must be an active part of it. You must give it strength and an effective voice when policy issues are being decided. You should support the majority view; dissent will weaken the organization.



Letters

Letters can be effective in making your views known to government officials and legislators. But some are more effective than others.

Be sincere when you write. Say what you want to say in your own words. Don't copy a form letter or use a form letter supplied by an organization.

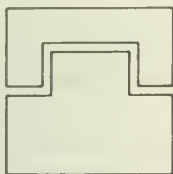
Cover only a single issue in each letter, preferably one that is current and on which legislation is pending. Be brief but make your point.



Telegrams or Mailgrams

If your message is urgent, use a telegram or mailgram to communicate your views on important issues. The cost is justified if a letter would reach a legislator too late for a key vote in a committee or on the floor of the House or Senate.

Telegrams or mailgrams should concentrate on a single issue. They should be brief and concise.



Phone Calls

Under certain circumstances, telephone calls can be a good way to communicate your views on policy issues (but don't let them replace letters or telegrams). For providing two-way communication when needed, setting up appointments, or getting information immediately, the telephone has no substitute.

Don't feel that you have to speak to your senator or representative in person unless you are personally acquainted. The staff members in his or her office are capable and can convey your feelings and message to the person you want to reach.



Office Calls at the Capital

A personal visit to a member of Congress in Washington or a legislator at your state's capital can be very effective. Prepare for the visit before you leave home. Find out what committees and subcommittees the member serves on and his or her seniority or rank on the committee.

Find out the member's philosophy on the issues by reading speeches or testimony. Determine in advance, if possible, if the member is for, against, or undecided about the views you plan to present. Look at his or her voting record as reported in the Congressional Record or in some national organization newsletters.

Even if your legislator is opposed to your position, meet and explain why you feel as you do. Document and substantiate the reasons for your point of view. Don't oversell your point. Protect your integrity; it's the only thing you have to sell.

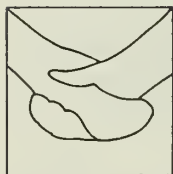
Don't expect to get a commitment of support for a given bill. The legislator may be able to negotiate better if he or she is not committed to a set position.

Make a short, well-planned visit. Recognize the limits on time that a member of Congress faces. If you meet for breakfast, lunch, or dinner, a separate visit to the office to present the same ideas is unnecessary and a waste of time.

After visiting or receiving help from a legislator, send him or her a thank-you note.

Should you be unable to see your legislator, make your views known to a staff member. Get acquainted with the staff members who work for your representative and senators. They often need information on the issues. Present your view in a rational manner. Facts, figures, balance sheets, and other evidence can be convincing.

Contacting Congressional staff members regularly and over time is more effective than visiting with them only when a bill is coming up for a final vote in committee. Get to know them, and give them a chance to know you.



Office Calls in the Home District

When your representative or senators visit their home state or district, use the opportunity to get acquainted and express your views. In your role as a resident "back home," you may have the best chance of making your views known to a member of Congress.

Invite your elected official to meet with your group or club the next time he or she is in the district. Prepare for the visit, listen to the legislator's ideas, and propose ideas of your own.



Group Visits

Many farm, homemaker, and community groups organize trips to Washington or the state capital to visit their legislators. These tours can be very useful and effective if carried out properly. Groups, however, like individuals, must prepare for such visits carefully if they are to be effective.

Successful groups meet in advance of the trip to receive information from officers or informed persons about (1) the most important issues to be discussed, (2) the position of the organization (as determined by legislative committees or voting delegates at an organization meeting), and (3) the legislator to be visited. Group leaders should send most of the information to the group's members at least one week ahead of the trip.

Successful groups listen attentively when they visit a member of Congress but also convey through their words and behavior that they have a mission to perform. They express in a direct manner their concerns, their proposals for change, and why they believe as they do.

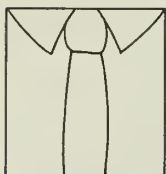
Avoid needless repeat visits. Groups or their representatives should be careful not to make pests of themselves. Camping out in a Congressional office is not an effective way to persuade.



Other Government Officials

Not all important policy decisions that affect farmers and rural communities are made by legislators. Many issues are decided by federal officials — such as the Secretary of Agriculture and his staff — and by state officials, county boards, school boards, park district boards, forest preserve districts, township boards, or

elected county and township officials. Most of the principles and methods that apply to effective communication with federal and state legislators will also be helpful with other government officials. You have a special advantage when you are dealing with officials in your home area because you are likely to have more opportunity to visit with them and make your views known.



Giving Testimony

Sometimes because of your knowledge on a particular subject or because you represent a group that holds an important point of view, you may be called upon to testify before a legislative committee, a local government board, a regulatory commission, or some other government unit. The goal of good testimony is to persuade certain government officials that your point of view is correct and worthy of consideration.

Be on time and ready to testify when called upon. At the beginning of your testimony, introduce yourself and state whom you represent. Briefly describe the nature of your organization and tell how many members it has, where they are located, what they do, and how long your organization has been established. You may also want to mention the significance of your organization and its members in terms of their contribution to the total economy. Whether your group is large or small, identify your position in the group, such as officer or board member. If your organization has passed resolutions that represent the combined efforts and thinking of many members, be sure to mention this fact.

A good witness must be concise, brief, and well prepared. Do not exceed your time limit. Write out in advance what you want to say. If you have too much material for your allotted time, summarize your oral remarks but turn in the full written text that you have prepared. Have extra copies of your remarks for committee use and for the press. If written proceedings are published, all of your remarks will probably be included, or they will be kept in the files for public inspection and for reference.

When testifying, use facts to back up your argument and presentation. Give figures if they will support the points you present. Stick to the issues or the bill under consideration — don't just sound off on all the things that "bug" you. Be sure that the information you present is accurate. If you are not sure that your source is reliable, check with more than one source.

Do a thorough job of research so that you are prepared. Analyze the issues you are discussing by pointing out the consequences or impacts of the proposed legislation or regulation.

Try to understand the background and knowledge of the audience you are talking to. Be ready to provide information and explanations on technical matters that they may not understand as well as you do. If you are dissatisfied with conditions or proposed legislation, be ready with positive proposals that you feel would correct the problems as you see them.

Be sincere and present your views without emotion. Be objective, even though you have a specific point of view. Don't worry if some of the officials you are talking to are known to be in disagreement with your point of view. Communicate in a low-key style. Many business groups have gained respect from members of Congress because they use analysis rather than emotion. Be prepared to express your views, but also be ready to listen to others.

Decide your position and stick to it. Changing positions discredits you as a witness. In the question-and-answer period, however, don't be afraid to say, "I'm not sure, but I'll find the answer and provide it to you." Don't bluff if you don't know.



Informing Other Interest Groups

Organizations concerned with agriculture, food, and the community may need to present their views to other groups if they are to achieve success in influencing policy or legislation. Such efforts help to make other groups aware of the issues, the concerns, and the viewpoints of your group and why your organization has a vital interest in the issues involved.

To be successful, you must show how your interests coincide with those of the group you are trying to inform. Your organization may need to support programs or proposals of other organizations to get those groups to support your efforts. Forming coalitions may be the only way to get majority support for the point of view that you want accepted. Such coalitions may be formed at the township, county, regional, or national level.



Support the Candidates of Your Choice

If you feel that your legislators in Washington and the state capital are doing a good job, are you helping them win reelection? Or if you think that they do not represent what you believe, are you helping elect candidates who more closely represent your point of view?

Support such candidates with your time and money. You can probably accomplish the most by working through the campaign committee or the political party that supports your candidate. In recent years, farmers, homemakers, consumers, and members of labor unions have proven that through active support in a campaign they can help elect candidates who support their points of view.



Keep Informed

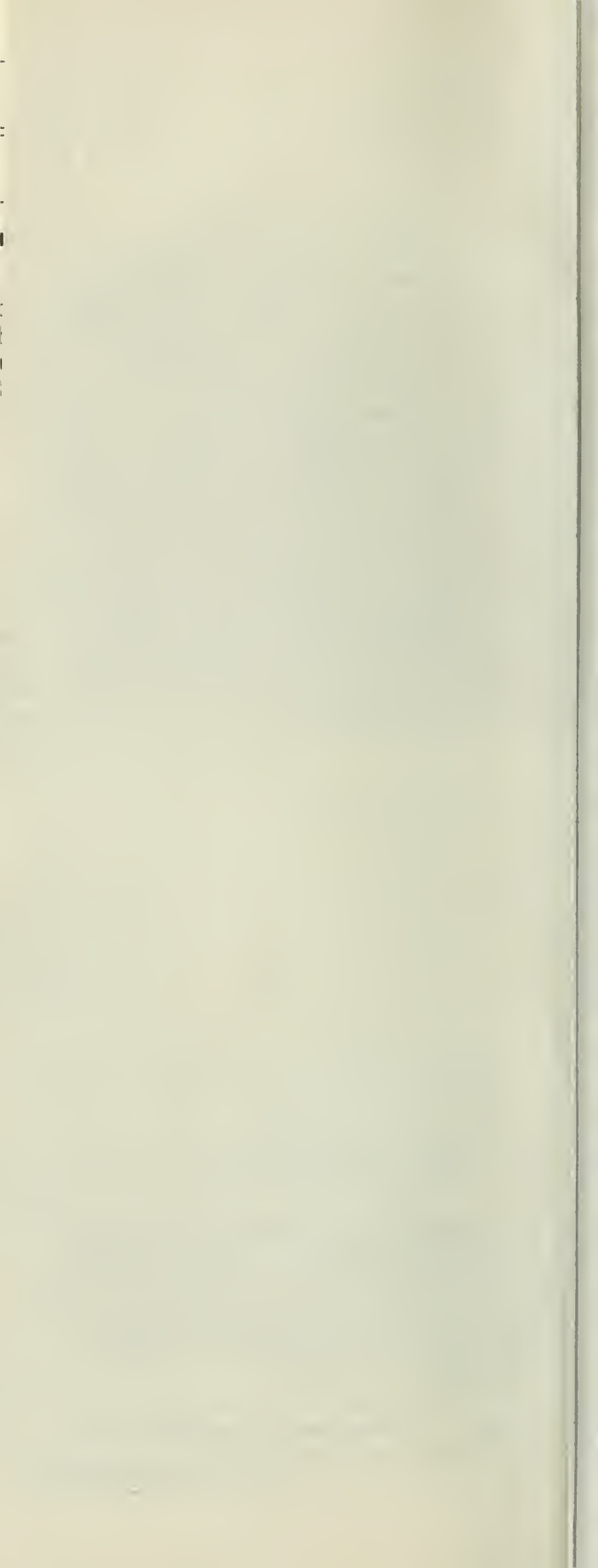
If you are to be successful in making your views known, you must not only know how to gain access to the decision makers, but you must also time your input carefully. Stay abreast of current issues and developments. Read newspapers, news magazines, farm papers, and public affairs journals. Listen to news and public forum programs on radio and television.

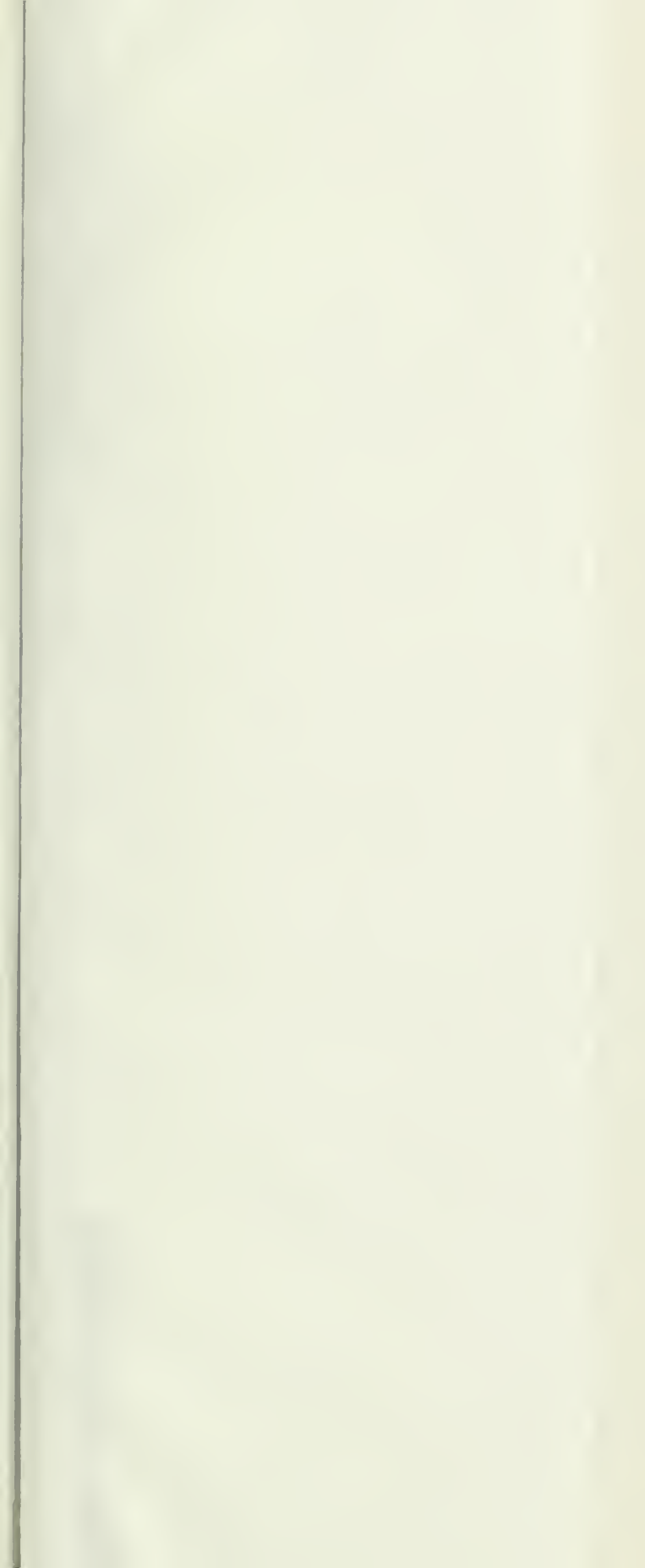
Take part in educational programs and policy discussions. Attend the public affairs and policy programs sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Service, local civic groups, churches, community colleges, and other organizations. By keeping well informed you will be better able to protect your own interests and to fulfill your role as a citizen in shaping the future of our democratic society.

In cooperation with NCR Educational Materials Project.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Cooperative Extension Services of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. William R. Oschwald, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

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