



National Association of
Conservation Districts

NACD August Recess Guide to Grassroots Engagement

Join conservation districts from across the country to help educate your elected representatives about the benefits of locally-led conservation.

Why?

Each August, members of the House of Representatives and the Senate head back to their districts and states to meet with constituents. There are nearly 100 new Members of Congress who were elected last November, all of whom have a direct say in federal conservation programs, and many of whom may not have ever heard of a conservation district.

This month represents a unique opportunity to:

- Educate Members of Congress on what conservation districts do in your communities; and
- Show why support for conservation programs at the federal level is so important.

NACD recommends conservation districts across the country meet with their elected representatives and show them exactly what locally-led conservation means in their community. The following pages explain the “how” for planning, scheduling and conducting these meetings.

Scheduling a Meeting

Congressional offices begin planning for their Member's August schedule months in advance, and it is important to get a meeting request in as soon as possible. However, before reaching out to the office, you need to think about the 'who, what, where, when and how?'

Who will be there?

Although the invite is for the Member, their office will want to know who else will be there. Consider your district's board, farmers and landowners who have received assistance and other local officials who may be involved with your district. Would having your NRCS district conservationist or state conservationist in attendance help the message? Communicate with neighboring conservation districts and try to partner up to host the meeting with your Member of Congress.

What will they be seeing and doing?

Members vote on conservation funding for technical and financial assistance. The purpose of the project-site meeting is for the Member to gain a better understanding of conservation districts and to see in real life what it is they vote on. Think about the locations of a few projects that might help them move from conservation funding as a concept to real life, on-the-ground help. Be sure to focus on *federal* programs and projects, since these are the programs that Members of Congress have influence over. Is there an EQIP project they can see? Maybe a watershed project that your district supported? This is a prime opportunity for Members to have their boots on the ground and understand the real-world implications of the votes they cast in Washington, D.C.

(Not sure what projects to highlight? Contact NACD's Government Affairs team for help.)

Where will the meeting be?

Many Members use August recess as a chance to get out of office for meetings. You should give some thought to convenient locations to their district offices and how your group will be getting to and from the project site. Although Members typically appreciate pictures out in a field, take into consideration if there is a building or room available afterward so everyone can sit and talk about furthering locally-led conservation.

When is the meeting?

The 2019 August recess runs from the week of July 29 through the week of Labor Day (Sept. 6), though the [Senate](#) and [House](#) have slightly different calendars for recess and the rest of the year. Given the Member's schedule in their district, try to narrow down a few days that work for everyone you would like to attend. Be respectful of how much time you request to have the Member out on a project site with you, since they are trying to squeeze in as many in-district meetings as possible. This is where it becomes important to highlight the different types of projects you have worked on and how conservation districts benefit their Congressional district. Once you've given thought to the above questions, you'll need to make the actual request.

How do you request a meeting?

Most Members' schedulers are based out of their Washington, D.C., office; however, initial coordination through their district or state office could be the best place to start. Give your Member's district office a call and ask how they receive scheduling requests for August Recess. Explain who you're calling on behalf of and what you plan to discuss. You may be asked to fill out a form on their website or email the pertinent information to the scheduler to formally request the meeting. Also, feel free to include different options for when the Member may be able to come out to visit with you.

After making the request, you may not actually get confirmation until a few weeks before the requested date. A short follow-up after three or four weeks may be appropriate but understand that offices will have received numerous requests like yours. If the Member of Congress is unable to attend, do not hesitate to extend the offer to host the District Director or Senior Field Representatives.

Hosting the Field Visit

Hosting the field visit is an exciting time. It's a chance to show off the good work your district is doing, take pride in your impact, and celebrate successes. However, any high-profile event can be stressful, too. When preparing for and conducting the visit, remember to:

Relax and Have Fun

Your Member of Congress relies on winning the vote of you and others for reelection. He or she wants you to like them and he or she wants you to have a positive experience during the visit. Otherwise, you might vote for someone else! Relax and have fun with the visit. No one is here to be disagreeable.

You Don't Have to Like Them

Not everyone has a Member of Congress that reflects their personal politics. However, they still need to represent you and your district's interest. Stay focused on the district's work and not more divisive issues. Keep an eye out for ways that you can make your district's work relate to the Member of Congress's values (i.e. fiscal responsibility, environmental protection).

Have a Plan

Before the big event, sit down with all the individuals who will be participating, and make a plan. What are the key messages you are trying to deliver? Who will take the lead and facilitate the visit? Who will talk about each topic? In what order? Thinking about these questions ahead of time ensures a smooth and productive conversation.

Stay on Topic

Members of Congress like to talk about their own pet issues and their successes. If you aren't careful, they can dominate the conversation and avoid the issues you want to discuss. It's a good idea to let your Member of Congress speak their piece, but then gently and politely steer the conversation back on topic.

Have a Tour and then a Chat

If possible, plan to show off a project and then sit and talk. Tours are invaluable for showing conservation in action. However, it can be difficult to have a substantive conversation while on the move. The discussion will be more focused and in-depth if you have a space to sit and talk. It is also beneficial to have space to talk out of the elements in case of inclement or hot weather, such as a barn, warehouse, office or tent.

Brag

This is not the time to be modest. Be sure to talk about all the good work your district does and highlight the magnitude of your impact.

Don't Be Afraid to Not Know Something

You will probably be asked a question to which you do not know the answer. It can be tempting to answer anyway, since everyone wants to demonstrate their expertise. However, do not try to make up or guess an answer under pressure. Just say that you do not know and will follow up with the answer after.

Get a Photo

Be sure to take plenty of photos during the visit. These can be shared on social media, at your next board meeting and with NACD. Members of Congress also love to post pictures of themselves out in the field with constituents. Do not be surprised if they want to take a photo, too!

Following Up

Once the visit is over, your work is not quite finished. Proper follow-up will ensure the outcomes of the visit are meaningful and durable. Be sure to:

Send a Thank You

A good, old-fashioned thank you note or email is still a valuable tool. Take this opportunity to include any handouts or additional information as well.

Debrief with NACD

Let NACD Government Affairs staff know that the meeting happened and how it went. NACD's advocacy efforts on your behalf are more effective when we know what meetings have taken place and can follow up with the Member of Congress's staff.

Invite Members of Congress and Their Staff to Future Events

Now that you have one successful visit under your belt, it's time to start thinking about the next one. Any time your district is hosting a public event, field day or awards ceremony, remember to invite your Member of Congress. He or she will not be able to make every event, but the invitation will keep your district at the front of his or her mind.

Questions? Contact NACD's Government Affairs team for help or suggestions at 202-547-6223 or coleman-garrison@nacdnet.org.