



Government Relations Toolkit

The Oregon Conservation Partnership has been working together for the past two years to help build statewide relationships and support conservation efforts throughout the state.

Communication with government agencies and elected officials is one of the services the Partnership and its member organizations provide the Watershed Councils, SWCDs, and Land Trusts. The best spokespeople for conservation, however, are the people who see and practice it directly. This resource is for conservation practitioners, managers, and board members in Oregon, to help them best express their accomplishments and needs.

Note: This is not legal advice. We did our best to communicate with the [Oregon Government Ethics Commission](#) (OGEC) and others to ensure accurate information as much as possible. When in doubt, though, consult an expert like those at OGEC.

Before you begin...

There are limitations on *lobbying* activities of 501(C)(3) nonprofits and of special districts like SWCDs. Nonprofits are legally allowed to spend up to 5% of their budget or time on lobbying activities, except for campaigning for individuals running for election. 501(c)(3) organizations cannot campaign at all for or against individuals running for election, but can campaign on ballot measures or initiatives.

Special district staff, managers, and board members are allowed to lobby, but must register as a lobbyist if they:

- Spend ≥24 hours *or*
- Spend ≥\$100 on lobbying *or*
- Receive compensation in the form of reimbursements (e.g. travel) *or*
- Are expected by superiors or as a responsibility in their contract to participate in lobbying activities as part of their job.

✗ *Campaigning* for an individual running for a publicly elected office is not allowed for 501(c)(3) organizations or special districts. Districts cannot advocate for or against ballot measures or initiatives, but 501(c)(3) organizations can up to 5% of their time or budget. ✗

Public money is not allowed to contribute to campaigns for candidates, ballot measures, or initiatives in Oregon. This means District staff should not use District time or resources to advocate for a particular position on issues determined by voters. Board members of Districts, however, are allowed to participate on campaigns if they are not compensated using public money.

If you plan to participate in your professional role in advocacy that takes a position on policies, be sure to track the hours and money spent to determine whether you need to register as a lobbyist.

These limitations do not apply for neutral education and outreach to legislators or the public. This includes neutral information about legislation, ballot measures, or initiatives. This leaves a lot of room for using your voice for good!

Government relations that are allowed and encouraged for nonprofits and districts

Whether you're lobbying, educating the public about conservation and natural resource issues, or sending articles you've written or been featured in to your legislators, your voice is an important one in the discussions that influence policy. Recommended actions are below, with “*N*” next to neutral items that are generally not subject to lobbying limitations, unless the content of the communication specifies a position on a policy or candidate.

At All Stages, for Employees and Boards: Connect and Communicate

- Send decision-makers news articles, e-newsletters, reports, and other documents demonstrating your accomplishments.
- Invite decision-makers to relevant meetings, being sure to indicate specific agenda items relevant to them.
- Connect on social media: like and follow decision-makers' social media and invite them to follow yours, respond to their communications with your projects when relevant. *N*
- Meet with legislators at their local office when possible (best availability before legislative days and session), participate in legislative days.
- Invite county commissioners and/or city councilors to serve on your board.

First: Plan and Learn

- Make a plan, and work with partners: coordinating efforts with associations, networks, and partners strengthens your message through consistency and shared resources. *N*
- Observe the implementation of policies, consider how it could be improved.
- Follow legislatively appointed Task Forces to learn about potential future legislation, and Rules Advisory Committees for implementation of legislation.
- Track state and federal policies, including the Federal Farm Bill, as well as city and county proceedings.
- Learn about the Governor's proposed budget. *N*

Second: Weigh In

- Submit public comments on administrative rules and budgets. The Conservation Partnership solicits letters from members in support of the federal Pacific Coast Salmon Recovery Fund. *N*
- Testify with state legislative committees in support of OWEB's budget and similar budgets with funding opportunities for conservation practitioners.
- Nominate people from your organization (or self-nominate) to serve on state commissions and boards. *N*

The Basics

1. *Plan and coordinate*—consistency and strategy strengthen messages
2. *Communicate* accomplishments and needs—to the public and directly to decision-makers
3. Develop *relationships* with connectors and influencers—local community leaders, influential bloggers and media, associations and networks
4. *Track* policy issues that may affect your organization or stakeholders

Summary

	Tipping Point	What then?
501(c)(3)	5% of the organization’s time or budget.	Stop or risk losing 501(c)(3) status. This means you should plan and budget carefully.
Special Districts and 501(c)(3)	Individual spends 24+ hours or \$100+ in a calendar quarter on lobbying, lobbying is expected of them as a job duty, or they are compensated for lobbying activities (including travel).	Register as a lobbyist.

Allowable activities: in general, here’s what SWCDs, Land Trusts, and Watershed Councils can (check mark) and can’t (x) do.

	Lobbying	Campaigning for candidates, ballot measures	Media (news, social)	GR Planning	Meeting with Legislators	Comments, Testifying (Rules, Budgets, Measures)	Serving on State Commissions and Work Groups
501(c)(3) employees	✓	NOT candidates	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
501(c)(3) boards	✓	NOT candidates	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
District employees	If not determined by the voting public	✗	If not regarding topic determined by the voting public	If not determined by the voting public	If not regarding topic determined by the voting public	If not determined by the voting public	✓
District boards	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Resources

<i>Communications Tips and Resources</i>
<p>“Make a difference for your cause: Strategies for nonprofit engagement in legislative advocacy” (Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information about knowing the legislative process and players, funding for advocacy efforts, developing advocacy strategies “Road Map for Engagement in Legislative Advocacy” worksheet <p>“Five Social Media Strategies for Government and Nonprofits” (Danielle Shapiro in <i>Forbes</i> online)</p> <p>“Briefcase Companion” (Oregon Capitol Club)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful tips for anyone testifying or otherwise interacting with policymakers, although intended audience is lobbyists
<i>State Policy and Resources</i>

Understanding the Policymaking Process

- “[How an Idea Becomes Law](#)” from the Oregon State Legislature

Contacting your legislators

- Oregon State Legislature “[Find My Legislator](#)” tool

Keeping up with legislation and committees

- Oregon Legislative Information (“OLIS”) [home page](#): schedule of readings, where to find and access bills and resources from hearings.
- Oregon State Legislature Bills and Laws [home page](#): Information on how to find a bill, bills from current and past sessions, links to Oregon Revised Statutes and Administrative Rules
- Oregon State Legislature [Citizen Engagement](#): Educational resources including legislative glossary, types of measures, “how ideas become laws”

Partnership resources: keeping up with legislation & more

- COLT [News](#)
- OACD [Legislative Page](#)

Federal Policy

Tracking the Farm Bill:

- <http://sustainableagriculture.net/>
- National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) [Farm Bill page](#)

Other Federal Policies:

- NACD [Issue Papers and News](#)
- National Land Trust Alliance [Issues and Action](#)