

Tips for Public Commenting

Submitting comments on a government document (e.g. a draft restoration plan) is a way to make your voice heard and influence decisions on issues you care about. Your comments can also improve the document. There are two types of comments:



Written comments are essentially a letter to the decision-maker that explains your opinion.



Verbal comments are remarks made at a public meeting that explain your opinion.

Preparing to Comment

Comment periods are typically short – often just 30 days – so it is a good idea to prepare beforehand. Here are a few ideas:



1. **Familiarize yourself with the issue.** You don't have to be a technical expert to comment, but it is helpful to have a good understanding of the issue. Gather and review background material (like the relevant laws and regulations, sample comments, reports) to become familiar with the issue and what should be included in the document.
2. **Identify key people.** You may want to identify a contact at the agency drafting the document (to get information about the document), as well as individuals and groups with similar interests (to coordinate).
3. **Create a checklist of important considerations.** This will help you keep track of what should be included in the document and what you'd like to see in it.
4. **Define your objectives.** What do you hope to achieve through your comments? Are you trying to stop an action? Correct factual errors? You should keep your objectives in mind as you develop your comments.

Parts of this guide have been adapted from ELIZABETH D. MULLIN, *THE ART OF COMMENTING: HOW TO INFLUENCE ENVIRONMENTAL DECISIONMAKING WITH EFFECTIVE COMMENTS*, 2ND EDITION (Env'tl L. Inst. 2013).

Need More Information?

Giving Your Verbal Comments

Before the Meeting

1. Find out when and where meetings will be held.
2. Prepare your comments. See the tips below.
3. Encourage others to attend the meeting with you and to give comments.
4. Use notecards and practice your statement.
5. Print written copies of your statement to bring with you.

Tips for Preparing Your Verbal Comments

Explain why this issue matters to you. The ability to add a personal touch to your message is one of the advantages of verbal commenting.

Pick one to three key points to emphasize. Clearly make these points and don't get bogged down by less important details.

Be able to state what you like, as well as what you don't like.

If you represent others, say so. There is strength in numbers - meeting officials are more likely to heed your comments if they know you represent a number of people.

At the Meeting

1. Introduce yourself to people before the meeting starts, and write down their names. You may meet people you will want to coordinate with next time, as well as people involved in the process.
2. Sign in, and if necessary, fill out a speaker registration card.
3. Give your statement, and if appropriate, submit written copies.

Drafting Your Written Comments

Here are six tips for writing a convincing comment:

1. **Make the strongest possible points.** Three tools will help:
 - o **Pound the law.** The document may leave out or not sufficiently address something required by law, or propose an action that could violate the law. These are good points to make.
 - o **Pound the facts.** The document could include facts that are incorrect, have been left out, or are not given enough consideration. Point these out.
 - o **Pound the table.** If there are no legal or factual errors, you can resort to "pounding the table." This generally means critiquing the process or people involved. Tread carefully when critiquing the people involved.
2. **Suggest specific language when possible and appropriate.** It's easier for a reviewer to adopt your wording than to draft new language.
3. **Use specific examples.** Whenever possible, back up a concern with an example.
4. **State what you support.** It is a good idea to note what you support in the document since it could be changed.
5. **Provide supplemental information.** Consider providing information (e.g. facts, articles) that was not included in the document.
6. **Offer helpful solutions.** If possible, offer suggestions on how a concern can be resolved.

Need More Information?