UNDERSTANDING POLICY DEVELOPMENT

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The old Washington cliche has it that, "Information is power." It is more correct, however, to say that, "*Accurate* information is power." Incomplete or erroneous information sooner or later proves to be poison . . . for the provider. In public policy, he who informs will be taken seriously and consulted by those in power; but he who misinforms will find himself short of that most precious commodity, credibility, and he will be ignored.

Information is, of course, the coin of the realm in Washington. That ubiquitous character, the lobbyist, deals in facts and accuracy more often than he gets credit for. The lobbyist, contrary to popular belief, seldom threatens or cajoles. Usually he makes reasoned arguments that, naturally, tend toward a conclusion he wishes the policy maker to reach.

The problem with lobbyists is that they are seen, by members of Congress, administration officials, the press and others, as inherently biased—a perfectly accurate perception. "Biased" in this usage is hardly pejorative. Lobbyists are professional advocates who are paid to hold a point of view and sway others to adopt it.

However, the fact remains that the information provided to policy makers—and from here on out we are talking mostly about members of Congress and in particular their staffs—by such advocates is often useful but suffers from a perception that it needs to be supplemented—balanced, perhaps—by more objective analysis. And that, of course, is where extension economists and analysts come in.

The opportunity for public policy analysts to exert an influence on Congressional decision making is much greater than you may think. Once again, remember that information is Washington's coin of the realm. It is true that in making a decision on some bill or issue a Congressman or Senator wants to know, "Who's fur it and agin' it," but he also wants informed analysis and data. He may not make his decision on that basis (an important thing to know so you do not become discouraged too quickly), but he wants and needs the information.

How, then, does he get it? Most legislators' information search consists largely of saying to staff members, "Find out about such-and-such." The legislator is a busy man and this is why he hires a staff. But the dependence of Congress on its professional staff—which is considerable—points out the importance of getting to know these people and working with them.

In researching an issue—and let's say for the moment that it is an agricultural policy topic—the legislative assistant is, in my experience, likely to seek information from one or more of the following sources: farm groups, especially those in his home state or district; administration sources such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); the Agriculture Committee staff; the Congressional Research Service; on-hand publications or some other means of independent study; and perhaps experts he knows at his state's land-grant institutions and Extension Service.

Which of these sources the staffer turns to will depend on several factors: his own preexisting knowledge of the subject (he may not need much help); his initiative (he may not be motivated to spend much time digging into the topic); the time between now and when a decision must be made (experience teaches that some people at USDA return phone calls more quickly than others); and how well he knows the particular source of information (most people are reluctant to call a source "cold" and ask for help from a person they don't know that well).

To work with these staff members and be helpful to them you should know something about them. You ought first to gain an appreciation of their importance because the tendency is often to be disappointed if you call a Congressional office and end up talking with a staffer rather than the Congressman—which will usually be the case. The pending omnibus trade bill, H.R. 3, provides a good illustration of the role staff members play. In both its House and Senate incarnations, the bill itself was about 1,000 pages long, exclusive of the several book-length reports that explained it. The average member of Congress did not read the bill; it is unlikely he even read much of the reports. He depended on his staff to provide him with information about what was in the bill, how it affected different sectors of society, how various groups felt about it. On such a major issue, it is unlikely that any member actually decided how to vote on the sole basis of his staff's work but, if he was able to take part in the debate over the bill, he owed that ability in part to the legislative assistants who *did* read enough to determine just what was in the bill.

It is always good to have personal contact with members of Congress when you can, of course, but remember that even for the professional advocates who work the halls of Congress daily most day-to-day contact is with staff, not members.

If you have not dealt much with Congressional staff, some things will surprise you. You will find that on average they are younger than you would think; that with few exceptions they make quite a bit less money that you do (and live in an area where the cost of living is higher); that they tend to spend a relatively short time in their jobs and then move on to something else. These observations are less true of committee staff—who tend to be more experienced, better paid and more tenured—and less applicable in the Senate, where the average staff member tends to have more influence and responsibility.

You as a policy analyst can be of enormous help to these people, and you will be rewarded by seeing your work make a difference—if you provide the right kind of information. A few ideas:

1. Quantitative information is more highly prized than qualitative. People already know, for example, that payment limits dampen farm program participation and if you tell them only this you have not done them much of a favor. But if you tell them by what percent program participation is likely to fall, you have done them a service.

2. Staff members will find the "impact on a typical farm" example useful in assessing the prospects of a given policy proposal; they also need, however, sector-wide implications because they legislate sector-wide.

3. You can provide valuable perspective by analyzing the budgetary costs of a proposal, but you should not expect that your projections will be normative. This is an area in which the Congressional Budget Office rules supreme. Anyone else's numbers are interesting but, in the last analysis, infinitely less important because that is the way the law says it will be.

4. Do not use equations, much less equations with funny Greek letters. Nine out of ten decision makers in Washington know only the three Greek letters adopted by their college fraternity or sorority and will tune out any material that relies on mathematics. This advice is not in conflict with #1 above. The staff member wants numbers, but in the form of specific costs and benefits, not equations.

5. Take full advantage of any access you may have to computer-enhanced graphics. Charts and graphs are excellent ways to communicate with busy people which Congressional staff members are.

6. In analyzing commodity programs, make sure the information you send is relevant to the member's region. A staffer from a West Texas district, for instance, will be unimpressed with an analysis in which a hypothetical cotton farm produces 750 pounds of lint per acre. They don't get many yields like that in West Texas.

7. Your information must be timely. Remember, the member of Congress has to make a decision whether the information is available or not. His committee chairman will not hold up a vote on the

ground the member has not had time to inform himself adequately. Therefore, if you are going to try and provide analysis to Congressional staff, be ever conscious of the ticking clock. If you aren't timely, nothing particularly bad is likely to happen to you, but the next time he needs to know something the staffer will call somebody else.

Finally, some general and random thoughts. First, understand that your ideas will be changed in their implementation. Don't feel rejected if the reply to your analysis is, "That's probably true, but the chairman is headed in the other direction. Sorry." Thus, the information you provide to policy makers will be instructive but not dispositive—and in this you are just like everybody else. So don't feel lonely.

Second, work to develop personal relationships, even if only over the telephone. As already noted, all of us are more likely to seek advice from those we know than from those we do not. You may have achieved an understanding of price elasticity that puts you very near the Nobel ranks, but if you never call the Congressional staffer and he never calls you he is unlikely to get the benefit of your knowledge.

And, third, be unafraid of controversy because agricultural policy is full of it these days. You should, of course, steer clear of partisanship or naked ideology, but your objectivity ought not paralyze your ability to make judgments and reach conclusions. It is through those judgments and conclusions that you will have your influence—and I am enough of a believer in the extension and land grant systems to think it would be a healthy thing if you were listened to more often.