

DEALING WITH THE POLICY MAKERS

HERB MANIG, Senior Natural Resource Policy Specialist, American Farm Bureau Federation, Park Ridge, IL

The format I would like to use is to ask and answer some questions about dealing with policy makers.

First, "Why would policy makers be interested in wildlife damage control in the first place?" In response, I would have to say that the problems with wildlife are increasing in number, diversity and complexity. Policy makers cannot afford to ignore controversies caused by them. We have problems in transportation with deer/automobiles collisions. We have airplane engines ingesting birds. We have health problems with respect to disease. Wildlife damage costs money. We also have problems with aesthetics. Some of the homeowners may not lose a lot of money when deer nibble their shrubs but they certainly don't like the looks of what they planted. All of these issues make it reasonable for policy makers to be interested in what you are doing.

How do you want policy makers to view the field of wildlife damage control? Necessary? Balanced? Professional? I contend that wildlife damage control protects biological diversity and ecosystem health. It is an integral part of wildlife management. If you are dealing with noxious weeds, we know that they invade ecosystems leaving no room for other plants or creatures. The same thing is true for the nuisance wildlife. They are invaders taking over and reducing biological diversity.

How do you want to be viewed by policy makers? Conscientious? Knowledgeable? If I were a wildlife damage control practitioner, I would like to be considered as a professional. But what constitutes professionalism? I feel a professional is characterized by two basic criteria. First, one must retain a body of knowledge. Second, a professional must have a code of ethics. I suggest that if you go before policy makers and they know you not only

have a body of knowledge that can be transmitted, but also have a code of ethics, you will be received with respect and credibility.

We have talked about the necessity of trying to "educate" policy makers. In your role as a wildlife damage control practitioner, if you are supposed to be "educating" the policy makers, how do you define education? When we talk about educating someone, whether it be the public, the media, or the policy makers, we are talking about actually causing a behavioral change. The person that you are trying to educate will be different from the person that he/she was before. They will either have more knowledge, a different attitude or some different skills. Where do you think we are working primarily in the field of wildlife damage control? Attitude. Does knowledge necessarily, by itself, change a person's behavior? No. If that were true, all of the tobacco companies today would be out of business because it seems to me the facts are in. But they are still making money because tobacco continues to sell. How do the mass media and interpersonal communication influence behavioral change? The mass media is best at raising interest and awareness and causing reinforcement. If you want adoption of an idea, commitment, and to change somebody's mind, however, the next step is to communicate face-to-face. That is how you induce change. It is a matter of first getting interest and awareness, and then adoption. An excellent example of an organization that is utilizing both in the very best possible way is the Church of the Latter Day Saints, the Mormons. Practically all mainline churches in this country have for several years experienced no growth, yet the Mormons have experienced growth year after year. They advertise on TV and in *Reader's Digest*. As soon as they know that you have an interest or awareness of what they are doing, you get a visit -- usually by two young,

well-dressed representatives. It is a face-to-face meeting. They are effective at influencing behavioral change.

What wildlife damage control situations would require emphasis on mass media? Isn't it true that some of your policy makers are now the American public? Recently, residents of Colorado and Massachusetts established policy on wildlife damage management by voting in referenda. Mass media is needed when a referendum question ends up on the ballot. Policy making by public opinion appears to be the wave of the future.

Where is face-to-face communication going to be important? If you are trying to influence policy makers, you have to see them face-to-face. What communication challenges do you face? First, I will point out the challenge of selectivity processes; i.e., selective exposure, selective perception, and selective retention. Most of us only expose ourselves to things we already agree with. We don't like exposing ourselves to something that is inimitable to our point of view. Sometimes we don't perceive anything that we don't already believe. Lastly, we often don't retain anything except for that which we previously believed. The same is true of the policy makers who you are trying to convince.

What is important to know about our elected officials? Let's assume you are trying to deal with a congressman or a state legislator. What's the one thing in life these people want? They want to get re-elected! So whatever you do with them or whatever you give them, it has to be something they can use to their benefit. Several potential wildlife damage control allies exist who have access and influence with these officials. If you are dealing with a congressman, one ally might be your governor. How about county commissioners, other key legislators, community organizations, commodity organizations, Farm Bureaus, homeowners associations or campaign contributors?

Your message to policy makers should be brief. One of the best lobbyists I know in our organization in Washington, DC needs to know only three things about your issue. That is all he wants to know. Most of us know too much about

what we are doing and we can't adequately convey that to the people who will decide in our behalf or in opposition to us. So make it brief. Also, make it easy to understand. Make it factual and science-based. I think it would be important that the message is consistent with the values of a person that is targeted for receiving it. We don't want to insult that individual. And lastly, placed in the best perspective consistent with ethics. An example of using values has to do with the Yellowstone bison issue. I think agriculture is losing a public relations battle right now with respect to bison leaving Yellowstone Park. The issue that the American public has been reading about in the paper is "it is going to adversely affect the economy of the livestock industry in the state of Montana." We're going to lose on that one. The "public" does not really care about the livestock industry in Montana. I've never seen anybody leave an extra amount of money in the grocery store to help the livestock industry in Montana or any other place. If we were to put that issue in the best perspective, we should approach it as such: Yellowstone is the crown jewel of our National Park System. It is also the first National Park to be decimated by too many ungulates. We all love Yellowstone Park and we need to have management within the park so that the willows and riparian areas aren't destroyed. The one way to correct the problem is to exercise management with respect to numbers of ungulates including bison. That's the issue!

Another important quality of a wildlife damage control professional is courage. When you need to make a decision regarding the population of a certain species that is too high, you may have to use lethal means of control. That is controversial. You will not be popular in all corners. Right now, certain sections of Northeastern Illinois have more deer than the areas can handle and these deer are consuming sensitive species in the forest preserves. Every so often there is an attempt to relocate excess deer at great expense. Some of these animals are injured; others die of stress. Then the protesters come out and picket, followed by the media. Somebody finally has to be courageous and say, "we can't move these animals anymore because they are

dying in transit and it is costing too much money.” So they bring the sharpshooters in to thin the herd out and get things back to normal. That takes courage. It is not very popular.

In conclusion, there is probably one message that agriculture should convey to wildlife damage control professionals. That simply is a very heartfelt thank you. Resident Canada geese in New Jersey completely eliminated a whole farm of spinach in

one night. Aquacultural enterprises are decimated by predaceous birds. Skunk problems are common in the Midwest. The coyote problem is almost ubiquitous. Back in my home state of Wyoming, people are on the verge of going out of business because they are getting hit so hard by the coyotes, mountain lions, and other predators. From an agriculture perspective, I do want to convey my thanks to you for what you are doing.