



# Make That Comment Count!

by Dianne Milliard

How can you help save the places you love? One of the best ways to advocate for a place or a cause near and dear to your heart is to write a public comment to the elected official or agency responsible.

There's a problem, though. Public officials and agencies receive hundreds, even thousands, of comments when a major change in management plans or regulations is proposed (especially now, with so many outrageous changes in the current administration). How can you make sure that your voice will be heard?

Some comments count more than others. A well-written public comment carries much more weight than hundreds of form comments. Here are a few tips on how to write a public comment that can really make a difference.

**Be Well Informed:** Do your homework. Read the proposed document. Take notes. If there's something you don't understand, contact the agency and ask questions. Note the specific wording you have issues with. Make a checklist of points you want to touch on. What arguments can you come up with? Can you make a strong economic argument? Can you find scientific backing for your point of view? Do the proposed changes conflict with existing laws or an agency's mission statement?

Pay special attention to the "Purpose and Need" section of the document. *Purpose* is the proposed action. *Need* is the federal agency's requirement to act upon it. Does the proposed action overstep the boundaries, or is it within purpose and need? Is there another, less damaging way to achieve the purpose? Look for strong arguments, backed with facts and documentation, to refute the purpose. Doing a little research will result in a much stronger comment.

**Be Specific:** "This bill sucks" is not helpful. What exactly is wrong with the legislation or regulation? Why? Back up your argument with facts. Document those facts. The people you are writing to may not know of studies or developments that you are aware of. Help inform them. Make concrete, scientific statements. Include copies of documents supporting your point of view as attachments or links.

**Be Concise:** Remember that the people reading your comments have dozens, hundreds, even thousands of comments to review. Make your arguments as strong as possible, but don't belabor the point. Focus—what exactly are you trying to accomplish? Clearly state why the specific issues are problematic.

**Be Well Organized:** Make your comment easy to read. Use short paragraphs. Summarize your arguments at the beginning of your document. Back up your points of view in the body. Use sub-headings and bolding to emphasize your points, so reviewers can grasp your arguments with a glance.

**Offer Solutions:** What actions should they take and why? Suggest specific language that can be changed to help clarify

or resolve the issues with the document. Note the page and paragraph to make it easier for them to follow your proposed changes. Are there areas you can compromise?

What are the underlying issues? Try to understand alternative points of view. After all, politics is the art of compromise and polarization gets us nowhere. How can you help make this a win-win situation?

Be creative but realistic. Offer real solutions and constructive criticism. If a similar solution is being successfully used elsewhere, provide documentation or a link to the successful solution.

**Be Polite:** Don't let your anger and frustration get the best of you. It might feel good to vent, but accusations and condemnations will simply get you dismissed as a crank. Your comment will not be taken seriously. Show your concern, but not your anger. Being rude is no way to win the hearts and minds of opposing views.

**Be Personal:** What is your personal connection to the place or issue? Why do you care? How will you be impacted by the proposed change? Have you spent time there? Is it close to home? Is there a connection to your profession? Don't ramble on, but tell them how the issue specifically affects you. Let them know you're not a faceless citizen.

**Start Positive:** Remember that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. What did they get right? Tell them. Congratulate them. Let them know what works.

**Follow Up:** Keep track of the issue. If your point of view prevails, thank them for listening. Let them know you appreciate their efforts.

*Dianne Milliard is a freelance writer and photographer living in the tiny town of McCarthy, Alaska. She has worn many hats over the years, including museum caretaker, tour guide, and 21 seasons as a park ranger in Denali, Death Valley, and Wrangell St. Elias National Parks. Check out her blog at [www.ramblingranger.com](http://www.ramblingranger.com).*



## Where Do I Comment?

**Contact information for state and federal elected officials:** <http://bit.ly/USelect>

**To comment on National Park Service planning:** <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/>

**To comment on U.S. Forest Service decisions that affect all national forests:** <http://bit.ly/FScomm>

**For actions that affect specific forests,** follow the Schedule of Proposed Actions at <https://www.fs.fed.us/sopa/> (click on map)

**To comment on BLM lands:** <http://bit.ly/BLMplans>. Click on the state where the action is taking place. Calls for comments will be listed there.

**To comment on government agency regulation changes:** <https://www.regulations.gov/>

