

NEW ZEALAND FEDERATION OF FRESHWATER ANGLERS (INC.)



Ever felt sufficiently concerned or annoyed about things affecting your fishing to want to do something about it? Here's some advice on why you should, and how you could, from the Steelhead Society of British Columbia...

Writing letters - that count.

A helpful guide courtesy of the Steelhead Society of B.C.

Why bother?

Writing letters is an effective way of influencing politics and policies.

As a general rule, politicians and bureaucrats credit every letter they receive as representing the thoughts and feelings of 500 to 1000 taxpayers who simply didn't bother to report their concerns. That makes each letter (your letter) up to a thousand times more important than most people realize. In a very real yet paradoxical sense, other people's laziness or reluctance to write makes the letter writer extremely influential. Clearly, people have influence, and do count - if and when they write letters. And that means that you maximize your influence, your worth, by writing letters.

Some general rules:

You should write an individual, independent letter.

Form letters or photocopied letters earn little respect. (Politicians and bureaucrats quickly recognize form letters handed out at shopping malls.) Letters are even more effective than petitions. And that's because letters require more time than is required to sign a petition, and because letter writers are acknowledged to be more concerned than most and to have better-than-average understanding of the issue.

Try to keep your letters as neat and error-free as possible.

But don't not write simply because you believe your letter must be perfect. There's no such thing as a perfect letter. It's also wise to have someone else-your spouse, mother, friend-read your letter for accuracy and tone.

For maximum effect, the letter should be personal.

It should also be polite, specific, brief and, as far as possible, non-partisan. It is okay to say that you voted for Mr. X or Ms. Y in the last election, but the effect is spoiled if you call them liars, cheats, and vandals, whom you will never vote for again in a hundred years. Secretaries have a habit of throwing such name-calling letters into the wastepaper basket before politicians even see them. Secretaries correctly conclude that such letters put their bosses in a bad temper, which can cause trouble for office staff. And politicians who do happen to see name-calling letters often conclude that nothing can be gained trying to win back the letter writer's support; instead, they might as well do the opposite - and please those on the other side.

What to say:

There are two basic types of letters:

1. letters which support or oppose,
2. letters which urge action on significant issues.

The first are simpler and easier to compose. For example, you might write in support of a Society letter or resolution. It might go as follows:

"Dear Minister:

I am writing to let you know I fully support the Steelhead Society's resolution calling for 90-metre green strips along Class 1 and Class 2 streams. The South Vancouver Island Chapter wrote to you about that issue on 10 June, 1992. Note that you have clearly identified the issue and your support of it."

You might then go on to establish your qualifications for claiming to represent an informed opinion, or to personalize your support by saying something along the following lines:

"I have lived on Vancouver Island since the age of 16, and I have 20 years experience working in the woods. I have fished for steelhead on Vancouver Island streams for at least 10 of those years."

And now for the opinion:

"I can assure you, Ms. or Mr. _____, that I have observed steadily declining wild steelhead stocks during that period. Some stocks have virtually disappeared."

Finally, the request:

"I urge you, in your role of Minister of Forests, to take action on this matter. We have a responsibility to our children to make sure that the genetic integrity of this great fish is not destroyed forever."

A little (don't overdo it) flattery can be helpful. For instance, you may say:

"When I heard you speak about the need to protect our environment at our community centre during the election, I was impressed by your sincerity and determination to take action. I know that you will wish to learn about the critical situation that steelhead face today." or, "Since your party supported a reduction of organochlorines, I'm sure you will want to know about a problem with the water quality of..."

Additional points:

Letters which either support or oppose should be brief; long endorsements or criticisms lose impact, and can become confusing. For the other letter - the "significant issue" letter - you are much more on your own. Remember these rules, however:

Being brief.

Being brief means dealing with one issue at a time. Two-page letters are less likely to be carefully or fully read. The reader is more inclined to merely scan, to determine the letter's subject or tone in order to respond with a standard computer reply. A one-page letter is almost certain to be read in its entirety.

Being specific.

Being specific means choosing one point and sticking to it. End with a clear and realistic request. There should be absolutely no ambiguity. You may wish to conclude: "My experience on this matter has convinced me that a 10-metre green strip is not adequate. As a minimum, I urge you to adopt the 90-metre green strip for all Class 1 and Class 2 streams in our area". Be wary of tone, and how you phrase requests and criticism. It's better to say, "*Perhaps you've received bad advice on this issue,*" than to say, "*You obviously don't know what you're talking about.*"

Who should you write to?

Politicians

Cabinet ministers usually pass letters on to bureaucrats for draft replies - but that spreads the message widely in the ministry or department, so it's generally worth starting at the top. Also, send a copy of the letter to your own MP, but don't just send it on its own. You can add a covering letter, but it is easier to hand-write a few words yourself across the top. You might be tempted to scribble: "*During the election you promised to kick backsides in Victoria. Do it!*" But it is better to write something along these lines: "*As you are my MP, I would be grateful if you would take up this matter with the Minister and let me know what he says. If your secretary will give me a call at 555-5555, we can arrange a meeting early next month to discuss it.*" This is an effective way to indicate that you want action, not a brush-off, nor a form-letter reply. Note that you have also given a deadline, albeit not one so demanding in tone or time frame as to be brushed aside. You can always beg off the meeting when the

secretary phones; you may be going on holiday next month and not really want it. But your MP doesn't know that. If there is a chance of your going to the office to complain of neglect - or worse, going to the press or publicly documenting her or his lack of interest on a serious environmental issue - he or she is far more likely to put the heat on the minister for some action. The minister's secretary now has cause for concern, especially if the minister does nothing. Your letter is now on top of the piles of two secretaries!

Bureaucrats

It isn't only politicians who need stroking and advice. Sometimes it pays to write directly to those in charge of a particular area. A letter directly to officials and managers shows that you understand that they are important and influential - and that you know who they are. But be sure to copy your letter to the minister involved. (See Copying, below.)

Editors

Letters written directly to newspapers are unlikely to be published unless they are topical, precise, and concise. To be deemed topical, your letter must normally be a reaction to a news item or opinion piece published one or two days earlier. That means you must act quickly, that you must write while the issue is still hot-while it's news, not history. Study the "style" of the Letters to the Editor section of your newspaper. Notice that each letter focuses on a single topic. And fight the temptation to say too much. By counting the words in a number of the published letters, you'll discover how short most of them are. And remember, include your address and phone (and fax) number.

Forms of address:

Ministers are called "Honourable", a polite (if not always accurate) description. The salutation for a letter to a minister is thus: Rt. Hon. John Doe, Minister of...

The letter starts: Dear Minister: or, Dear Mr. or Ms. Doe:

In the case of the Prime Minister, it is: Dear Prime Minister.

Addresses:

To make things easy, all elected politicians have one address,

The Rt. Hon. Ms. or Mr. Y., MP
Parliament Buildings
Wellington.

Postage:

No stamp is needed for letters to members of Parliament in Wellington. Letters to members at their constituent addresses require regular postage. You can also fax or e-

mail letters. Not only can faxes be used to demonstrate vigilance and promptness - traits noticed by wise politicians and bureaucrats - but faxes save you a stamp. If you wish, you can fax and mail the same letter, helping to ensure it stays on top of the pile.

"Copying" your valuable letters:

Your letter's effect (and hence the return on your effort) is greatly enhanced by sending copies to others of influence. This simple practice helps ensure that your letter is taken seriously, and that's because the person, ministry or agency to whom you send it knows that others also know your views. Additionally, you enlist allies through your "copied" letters, and having allies helps guarantee action. The convention is to use "c." after your signature. After the "c." you list the names of the people to whom you have sent copies of your letter. For example, following your signature, your letter might look like this:

c.: Steelhead Society of British Columbia
 Hon. Michael Harcourt, Premier
 Mark Hume, Senior Reporter, Vancouver Sun

If you write to a politician or bureaucrat about anything to do with freshwater fishing, send a copy to the New Zealand Federation of Freshwater Anglers. The NZFFA - and other groups concerned about our fisheries - can be more effective when they know what sorts of letter the politicians and bureaucrats are receiving.

Letters are commonly copied to members of the press, either those known to write about environmental issues, or directly to an editor, radio or television broadcaster. Community newspapers are hungry for such letters - and community papers are widely read. Be prepared, however, to defend your position on controversial topics. (You must, of course, include your address and phone number with any letter to the editor.)

It is courteous to copy a letter to people mentioned in your letter. Letters to a minister should also be copied to the Prime Minister and, usually, to other cabinet ministers. Frequent letter writers soon develop a standard copy list. For example, a letter to the Ministry of Fisheries, criticizing the proposed farming of exotic fish, is more effective if copied to the Minister of Environment, and your local MP, the official opposition critics, the press, and other environmental groups.

Remember also that the same holds true for local and regional issues. You may wish to consider writing to the Regional Council, the City Council Secretariat Unit, the Fish and Game Council, as well as your local councillors and MP's. Don't just leave it to others, or local organisations to represent you. As shown above, individuals can make a difference - if they are heard.

New Zealand Federation of Freshwater Anglers, (Inc.) Dated: July 2000