

# Testifying at a Public Government Hearing

During the federal rulemaking process, agencies seek information about the problems their proposed rule is supposed to address, how well the rule addresses the problems, and how the rule could be improved. As part of this process, all proposed rules go through a public comment period, which may include a public hearing.

Taking part in such a hearing sends an important signal to the agency about the public’s level of concern or support. It is an opportunity to speak directly to agency representatives, including managers and staff who developed the proposal. It can also be a rallying point for grassroots efforts and an opportunity to get attention from the press or public.

To find out about public hearings related to a proposed rule, the “Dates” section of the notice in the *Federal Register* will indicate where and when any hearing(s) will be held, how to register, or how a hearing can be requested. You can submit accessibility-related requests for language interpretation, preferred seating for wheelchair or hearing impairment, and other needs, though there is no federal standard for accessibility.

The purpose of federal agency public hearings is to hear what the public thinks—agency representatives are there to listen, not to engage in debates with the speakers, but they sometimes ask questions. Unfortunately, bad actors also use these hearings to submit disinformation intended to prevent progress on equitable, science-based regulations. It is critical that

agencies hear from members of the public who can counter disinformation and ensure that the agency’s actions benefit and protect ordinary people.

## What to Expect at a Regulatory Hearing

Whether the hearing is in-person or virtual, plan to show up in advance of when you are scheduled to testify, to settle in and get a sense of what the hearing is like before you are called.

- Be prepared for a wait. Depending on the number of speakers, there may be a delay.
- Listen for your name. You will be called to speak when it is your turn to testify.
- You will be speaking to a panel of agency officials who are there to listen and take notes. The officials may ask you a few clarifying questions.
- You will need to share a copy of your testimony. If you physically attend a hearing, you can bring printed copies to leave behind, but it’s also good practice to submit your testimony online to be sure it’s adequately documented in the public record. Be sure your testimony includes your personal contact information in case someone wants to follow up with you.
- After you have finished testifying, you are free to leave or stay to hear others’ comments.



Alyssa Tsuchiya

UCS Science Network member Richard Reis (second from right) testifies at a December 2017 public hearing organized by the EPA on heavy-duty vehicle emission standards.

## How to Prepare Your Testimony

Speakers are generally given no more than three to five minutes, but you don't have to fill the entire time.

- Remember this formula: 1 minute = about 150 words. Plan your comments for no more than 750 words.
- Write your comments down and practice speaking them.
- Hearings with simultaneous language interpretation ask that you do your best to speak slowly.

## A Basic Outline

### Introduction

Introduce yourself and why you are commenting—how does this rulemaking affect you? Explain why you are there.

For example: “Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is [your name here] and I am here today as [include your area of expertise, job title, where you're from, other relevant expertise or affiliations, and if you are a member of an affected community]. I support maintaining strong carbon pollution standards for our passenger cars and light-duty trucks. These standards have already gone through a rigorous technical review process, which found that auto manufacturers have the technology to meet the standards. I urge you to keep these standards as originally designed to ensure the greatest reductions in oil use and global warming emissions.”

### Your personal reason for testifying

Use examples from your own life to show why you think regulatory action on this issue is important—it will make your testimony memorable. The agency would rather hear from real people with real concerns than just to hear the same talking points repeated. You can talk about your concerns for the environment, public health, safety, etc.

For example: “I'm here because I'm concerned about the pollution from the highway near my home and my child's school, and as a [pediatrician, or other relevant expertise] I know children are more vulnerable to the negative health effects of pollution.”

### Provide constructive feedback

Share what you like about the proposal and what you're concerned about. For example, describe the benefits of strong standards and the hazards of lax standards:

- Pull in a few key talking points that back up your reason for testifying.
- Some data and technical information is helpful, but remember to keep it short and avoid jargon. You can [submit more extensive written comments](#) in addition to your oral testimony.

### Conclusion

Reiterate your position and thank the panel.

For example: “Once again, I support these standards because they are *working*. We should maximize their benefits by making our cars and light-duty trucks more efficient, and I urge you to keep the standards on track as originally designed. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.”

Your voice matters, and by making a comment at a hearing you are helping to ensure that government decisions benefit your loved ones and your community. For more about the federal rulemaking process, see our guides “[Inside the Federal Rulemaking Process](#)” and “[How to Participate in Federal Rulemaking](#).”

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