

Daily Courier

THE VOICE OF JOSEPHINE COUNTY SINCE 1885

House Committee on Rules
Re: Testimony in favor of House Bill 2486

May 5, 2021

Chair Smith Warner and members of the House Committee on Rules,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of House Bill 2486. My name is Scott Stoddard, and I am the editor of the Grants Pass Daily Courier, the only daily newspaper in Josephine County.

HB 2486 is a critically important bill for attaining truly independent news coverage of wildfires in Oregon. The Almeda Fire last September destroyed large parts of Talent and Phoenix in Jackson County, but no professional journalists were on hand to document that fire because we were not allowed beyond roadblocks without an authorized escort. That is standard operating procedure in Oregon: Members of the media cannot proceed past roadblocks unescorted to cover wildfires.

Because the agencies responding to the Almeda Fire were focused on fighting the fire and didn't have the personnel nor the logistical infrastructure in place to escort journalists past roadblocks, there is no firsthand account nor documentation by any reporter or photographer of the most destructive wildfire in Oregon history.

Reporters and photographers trying to cover wildfires in Oregon who manage to get an escort to accompany them past roadblocks often are taken to scenes that are stage-managed by public information officers. Crews are told ahead of time that media will be visiting. We are usually kept far away from the front lines where men and women are actually working on stopping fires.

I can tell you from experience that fire managers do not want images of burning forests appearing in the newspaper — that's considered bad PR. So journalists are not taken to those scenes. The media, on the other hand, considers those visuals to be news, a truthful and honest representation of what's really happening beyond the roadblocks.

During fire season I am out covering wildfires on a regular basis, both as a photographer and a reporter. Every summer, I am stopped and stymied by public information officers who want to tightly control what I see and who I speak to. Meanwhile, just over the border in California, journalists covering wildfires and other natural disasters by law cannot be stopped at roadblocks as long as they show their press credentials. They cover these news events safely and diligently self-police their own ranks. Do you recall the last time you heard about a member of the media causing a problem at a California wildfire? Any arguments about HB 2486 jeopardizing safety do not hold up when you examine the history of journalists covering California wildfires unfettered and without incident.

No other county in Oregon has seen more acres burn because of wildfires since 2017 than Josephine County. Wildfire coverage is vitally important to the people of Southern Oregon, and residents here turn to their local newspapers for reliable, professionally reported information because we are the primary — sometimes the only — news source for local news events such as a nearby wildfire. Our readers deserve coverage that is independently gathered, not filtered through the lens of the Oregon Department of Forestry or the U.S. Forest Service.

HB 2486 is not a big ask. It merely moves Oregon law toward alignment with California law with regards to media access to areas subject to emergency closure. I ask that you support this bill in order to put an end to unnecessary and unfair restrictions on reporters and photographers trying to independently cover wildfires in our state.



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