

HB4087A: “Rules of the Road” for Media Access to Wildfire and Natural Disaster Sites

Problem:

Conditions of media access to active wildfire and natural disaster scenes has been a point of friction between public safety agencies and media representatives for several years, and it was highlighted by unexplained access denials during the huge fires of 2020. Without consistent guidance, onsite public safety officers have been put in the position of making on-the-spot access decisions that may vary greatly among agencies and site types, ranging from relatively easy access to no access at all. This has been a point of frustration for all involved.

HB4087A’s Solution:

HB4087A is a bipartisan bill that builds upon 2021 HB2486, heard twice in House Rules, and it is the product of a broad Interim workgroup of media, state and local public safety, and commercial timber representatives. It passed the House 48-4. HB4087A creates a collaborative, public safety-media process for training and dissemination of common media access protocols. Key elements of the bill:

- Creates a bias in state law toward allowing media access to wildfire and natural disaster sites on public lands.
- An on-scene commander’s or the commander’s designee’s decision to not allow access is final-and-binding.
- Media representatives enter a site at their own risk with no promise of rescue, and they are responsible for their own personal protective equipment.
- Neither individual public safety personnel nor any agency may be held liable for a media representative’s injury or death after entering a site.
- Media representatives may be required to show proof of having completed safety training, jointly approved by public safety and media professional associations. LC52 specifies key elements of training, such as site protocols and safety equipment use.
- Creates a standing, media-public safety committee to recommend training content. The committee will report back to the Legislature on implementation.

Our goal from this bill is to establish a collaborative mechanism to establish understood “rules of the road” so that those media representatives who are allowed to enter wildfire and natural disaster sites do so safely, and to improve mutual understanding of public safety and media roles in these situations.