



Society of Environmental Journalists

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May 23, 2018

Scott Pruitt, Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Mail Code: 1101A
William Jefferson Clinton Building
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W.
Washington, DC 20460
via e-mail: Pruitt.scott@Epa.gov

Dear Administrator Pruitt:

The Society of Environmental Journalists strenuously objects to the Environmental Protection Agency's selective barring of news reporters from your "National Leadership Summit" on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in drinking water, and to the EPA physically forcing an Associated Press reporter from the premises.

It beggars understanding that the EPA would prevent any reporters from covering a topic of such intense nationwide interest and concern. But these are just the latest additions to your pattern of antagonism toward the press, and disregard for the public's right to know what EPA is or is not doing to protect their health and the environment.

This meeting, organized well in advance to gather input on a critical public health policy initiative, as a matter of course should have admitted news reporters in order to inform the public about what occurred. But as recently as a couple weeks ago, your staff was informing reporters that there would be no room for the press at this invitation-only event, because there was not enough space in the room selected for it.

This is patently ridiculous. Surely, larger rooms were available at the EPA headquarters or in a nearby federal building or hotel.

Evidently your staff relented at some point on May 22 and agreed to admit reporters for some news organizations. But not all: The Associated Press, CNN and E&E News, all highly respected news outlets serving enormous national audiences, were turned away at the door.

A female AP reporter has recounted that when, in response to being barred, she asked to speak with a public affairs staffer, guards instead laid hands on her and removed her from the building by force. This is completely unacceptable.



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The livestream of the May 22 event provided by EPA - which has been offered as some sort of alternative to on-the-scene coverage - turned out to be highly selective as well, with most of the summit's morning session held without being broadcast online.

Finally, though you allowed press coverage the afternoon of the summit's first day, your agency once again excluded at least some reporters on the session's second day, May 23.

While informing the public via news media is just good policy, holding the meeting open to the public is also legally required under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (5 USC § 1-16) and the Government in the Sunshine Act (5 U.S.C. § 552b). According to your own agency's press release, the summit included representatives from more than 40 states, tribes and territories, 20 federal agencies, congressional staff, industry groups and non-governmental organizations, and the agency intends to use information from the summit to help it develop a management plan. There is no justification for secrecy here.

On behalf of SEJ's 1,400 members and all other journalists covering the EPA, we urge you to:

- Repudiate this hostile approach to dealing with the press and public.
- Consistently open up important meetings, announcements and events to the public and press.
- Never discriminate against a news outlet based on the content or editorial slant of its coverage.
- Make arrangements to accommodate rather than restrict access by the press and public — and to answer their questions.
- Withdraw your objections to the publication by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry of a draft assessment of water contamination by these chemicals. According to news reports, that study is still being withheld from the public.

Your failure to release this report, along with the difficulties inflicted on reporters trying to cover the summit, inhibit public understanding of how the EPA is regulating water quality and constitutes an abuse of the free press and the public's right to know. We emphatically urge you to end these practices immediately.

Sincerely,



Bobby Magill, President
Society of Environmental Journalists



Jonathan Knutson, President
North American Agricultural Journalists

cc: Jahan Wilcox, Wilcox.jahan@Epa.gov
cc: Arthur Elkins, Inspector General, OIG_Hotline@epa.gov