



Society of Environmental Journalists

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March 30, 2018

Liz Bowman, Associate Administrator for Public Affairs
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
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Washington, DC 20460
Bowman.liz@Epa.gov

Dear Ms. Bowman:

On behalf of the Society of Environmental Journalists, I write to urge the Environmental Protection Agency to respond to reporters' questions about Administrator Scott Pruitt's reported plan to change the agency's longstanding policy on the use of scientific research in promulgating regulations.

SEJ concurs with the National Association of Science Writers' March 23 letter objecting to the way in which the EPA made a major policy announcement via a hand-picked partisan publication, the *Daily Caller*, and then refused to answer any questions about the published report.

EPA spokesman Jahan Wilcox responded to reporters' questions regarding Administrator Scott Pruitt's comments in the *Daily Caller* about a new science transparency policy by referring reporters to that publication's March 21 article, which was said to be based on an "exclusive" interview with Mr. Pruitt and which the agency had circulated as an official press release.

The EPA referred to at least one SEJ member journalist as well as *Think Progress* writer Mark Hand to this article when they asked about Pruitt's policy change. That's completely unacceptable. As you know, it's a fundamental precept of responsible journalism to confirm all information with the source, and not to rely on the accuracy of media reports, especially from other outlets, when reporting news.

Unfortunately, the agency's current public affairs leadership seems not to understand its obligations to the public — and, by extension, to the news media. When I emailed a



series of questions about related EPA press policies on March 23, Liz Bowman, associate administrator for public affairs, replied with this statement, which is nearly identical to the response Hand received:

“The Trump EPA is one of the most widely reported on agencies in the federal government and the Office of Public Affairs has provided regional and national journalists – from the *New York Times* to the *Daily Caller* – with an unprecedented amount of access. This is a vast improvement from four years ago when [E&E reported](#) that the Society of Environmental Journalists called that EPA an ‘incredibly secretive’ agency.”

SEJ has seen no such “vast improvement” in press access. The EPA restricted access in the Obama administration, and EPA restricts press access today, albeit perhaps with somewhat different tactics. It is false and entirely inconsistent with SEJ member experience to claim that the EPA is affording reporters “an unprecedented amount of access.”

Journalists' coverage of the EPA and the frequency with which EPA appears in news stories is not in any way a reflection of the access EPA provides reporters. Instead, this coverage reflects broad public interest in EPA and the many changes in federal environmental regulations proposed by this administration. That public interest is the very reason why EPA should respond more openly to reporters' requests for information about environmental regulation and policies.

To quote from EPA's website, “The mission of EPA is to protect human health and the environment.” Toward that end, the website says the agency works to ensure that: “All parts of society – communities, individuals, businesses, and state, local and tribal governments – have access to accurate information sufficient to effectively participate in managing human health and environmental risks.”

It beggars understanding how the public can get accurate information about EPA's actions on its behalf when major policies are announced in this way, and the agency's Office of Public Affairs brushes off reporters' inquiries in such a cavalier manner. As public servants, you have a duty to be transparent and responsive to questions from the public, including journalists.

A little over two months ago -- after incidents in which EPA publicly attacked reporters for doing their job -- SEJ wrote to Ms. Bowman seeking a dialog with the agency on how to become more open and responsive to the news media. Among the principles we asked EPA to embrace was to “engage with reporters, and maintain professionalism at all times” and “commit to responding to inquiries in a meaningful and timely manner.”

SEJ has yet to receive a response to that Jan. 22 letter, which reflects a lack of courtesy and professionalism that we have not seen before. The *Daily Caller* episode reinforces that perception, and it demonstrates a lack of openness and transparency that is contrary to the agency's stated mission.

Reporters are proxies for the public. When the EPA declines to answer reporters' queries with swift, direct, accurate and substantive answers, it severely limits the public's access to information it deserves to have, and it inhibits the ability to monitor how the EPA is protecting public air and water. The public deserves better.

SEJ respectfully requests that EPA correct this behavior immediately.

Sincerely,



Bobby Magill, President
Society of Environmental Journalists