



Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

Department of Transportation

Director's Office

355 Capitol St. NE, MS 11

Salem, OR 97301

DATE: February 3, 2022

TO: House Committee on Rules

FROM: Lindsay Baker, Assistant Director, Government and External Relations
Oregon Department of Transportation

SUBJECT: HB 4087 – Media Access to Emergency Scenes (-1) Amendment

INTRODUCTION

House Bill 4087, with the (-1) amendment, grants credentialed or documented representatives of new media organizations access to scenes of emergencies that are otherwise closed to the public. The measure specifies that denying access or granting access to the site without an escort falls to the sole discretion of the on-site scene commander or a designee of an on-site scene commander. The measure tasks the Office of Emergency Management with developing guidelines for implementing the measure.

DISCUSSION

The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) currently manages close to 8,000 miles of road throughout Oregon and frequently responds to emergencies brought forward by flooding, fires, landslides, winter storms, crashes, and more. Conditions change quickly in any emergency. What is safe one minute may not be the next. The decision by ODOT to close a road is made because traveling conditions are dangerous, and first responders need space to safely go about their work. Quite often, ODOT does not know the full extent of the hazards that may exist in an area until crews are able to fully assess the damage.

The media is one of ODOT's most valuable partners and helps provide crucial information to the public about the situation on the ground. Currently, ODOT staff routinely escort media representatives during emergencies that have prompted road closures. These representatives are advised on safety equipment, procedures, and locations that are safe to work from. During events that have larger and ongoing interest, ODOT often organizes media tours. ODOT's own videographers, photographers, and other communications staff are required to have an escort in closed areas to ensure the safety of responders, staff, and communications personnel.

ODOT is concerned that HB 4087, with the (-1) amendment, could result in undue harm to representatives of news media organizations as well as those responding to an emergency. When responding to an emergency situation or recovering from a weather event or crash, for the safety of both first responders and media representatives, ODOT must know who is on site at all times and have confidence in their ability to navigate an ever-changing situation. At any given site, there could be hidden dangers and threats not visible to someone who may not have received proper training and whose personal protective equipment may not be suitable. It is because ODOT values the safety of its crews, other first responders, and media representatives, that ODOT strongly encourages the committee to consider amending HB 4087 to strengthen the

requirement that news media representatives coordinate with the lead emergency response organization prior to attempting access to an emergency site.

SUMMARY

HB 4087 expands access for media representatives during emergency situations. ODOT recommends an amendment clarifying that advanced coordination still be required for news media representatives. This change is necessary to ensure the safety of first responders and media representatives. ODOT thanks the committee for their commitment to ensuring fair and open media reporting, and safety for personnel responding to emergency situations.

Please feel free to reach out to me with any additional questions.