



Society of Environmental Journalists

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Commissioner Joseph A. Farrow
California Highway Patrol
601 N. 7th St.
Sacramento, CA 95811

August 7, 2013

Dear Commissioner Farrow:

The California Highway Patrol's treatment of the media at the CalTrans construction site in Willits, CA, is unacceptable. The CHP's increasing harassment of media there, culminating in the arrest of news photographer Steve Eberhard July 23, 2013, directly contravenes the right to gather news that derives from the First Amendment. On behalf of the Society of Environmental Journalists, we ask you to reconsider your media policies.

As annoying as the protesters at this contentious site have been to CalTrans, it is the responsibility of law enforcement agencies to enforce the laws, not single out the journalists who are reporting on a situation of interest to the community. Arresting the messenger is not the answer to CalTrans' embarrassment. The Highway Patrol is not empowered to restrict public expressions of disapproval, or to keep the public from knowing about them.

Requiring escorts in dangerous circumstances can be reasonable, but using that requirement as a method of restricting access to publicly financed construction projects is not. Creating obstacles to public participation places the CHP at odds with the public they serve. Both CalTrans and the CHP are employed by the people of the state of California. It is in the public interest to allow reporters and photographers to document the activities of state agencies.

Unless citizens are fully informed, they cannot make effective decisions about government actions. Taking photographs of newsworthy public events is Eberhard's job. Arresting him for doing his job seriously undermines our Constitutional democracy.

Sincerely,

Beth Parke, Executive Director

Joseph A. Davis, Director FOI WatchDog Project



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*Strengthening the quality, reach and viability of journalism across all media
to advance public understanding of environmental issues*