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## Efforts to Limit the Flow of Spill News

By **JEREMY W. PETERS**

When the operators of Southern Seaplane in Belle Chasse, La., called the local Coast Guard-Federal Aviation Administration command center for permission to fly over restricted airspace in Gulf of Mexico, they made what they thought was a simple and routine request.

A pilot wanted to take a photographer from The Times-Picayune of New Orleans to snap photographs of the oil slicks blackening the water. The response from a BP contractor who answered the phone late last month at the command center was swift and absolute: Permission denied.

“We were questioned extensively. Who was on the aircraft? Who did they work for?” recalled Rhonda Panepinto, who owns Southern Seaplane with her husband, Lyle. “The minute we mentioned media, the answer was: ‘Not allowed.’ ”

Journalists struggling to document the impact of the oil rig explosion have repeatedly found themselves turned away from public areas affected by the spill, and not only by BP and its contractors, but by local law enforcement, the Coast Guard and government officials.

To some critics of the response effort by BP and the government, instances of news media being kept at bay are just another example of a broader problem of officials’ filtering what images of the spill the public sees.

Scientists, too, have complained about the trickle of information that has emerged from BP and government sources. Three weeks passed, for instance, from the time the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded on April 20 and the first images of oil gushing from an underwater pipe were released by BP.

“I think they’ve been trying to limit access,” said Representative **Edward J. Markey**, a Democrat from Massachusetts who fought BP to release more video from the underwater rovers that have been filming the oil-spewing pipe. “It is a company that was not used to transparency. It was

not used to having public scrutiny of what it did.”

Officials at BP and the government entities coordinating the response said instances of denying news media access have been anomalies, and they pointed out that the company and the government have gone to great lengths to accommodate the hundreds of journalists who have traveled to the gulf to cover the story. The [F.A.A.](#), responding to criticism following the incident with Southern Seaplane, has revised its flight restrictions over the gulf to allow for news media flights on a case-by-case basis.

“Our general approach throughout this response, which is controlled by the Unified Command and is the largest ever to an oil spill,” said David H. Nicholas, a BP spokesman, “has been to allow as much access as possible to media and other parties without compromising the work we are engaged on or the safety of those to whom we give access.”

Anomalies or not, reporters and photographers continue to be blocked from covering aspects of the spill.

Last week, Senator Bill Nelson, Democrat of Florida, tried to bring a small group of journalists with him on a trip he was taking through the gulf on a Coast Guard vessel. Mr. Nelson’s office said the Coast Guard agreed to accommodate the reporters and camera operators. But at about 10 p.m. on the evening before the trip, someone from the [Department of Homeland Security’s](#) legislative affairs office called the senator’s office to tell them that no journalists would be allowed.

“They said it was the Department of Homeland Security’s response-wide policy not to allow elected officials and media on the same ‘federal asset,’ ” said Bryan Gulley, a spokesman for the senator. “No further elaboration” was given, Mr. Gulley added.

Mr. Nelson has asked the Homeland Security secretary, [Janet Napolitano](#), for an official explanation, the senator’s office said.

Capt. Ron LaBrec, a Coast Guard spokesman, said that about a week into the cleanup response, the Coast Guard started enforcing a policy that prohibits news media from accompanying candidates for public office on visits to government facilities, “to help manage the large number of requests for media embeds and visits by elected officials.”

In a separate incident last week, a reporter and photographer from The Daily News of New York were told by a BP contractor they could not access a public beach on Grand Isle, La., one of the areas most heavily affected by the oil spill. The contractor summoned a local sheriff, who then told the reporter, Matthew Lysiak, that news media had to fill out paperwork and then be

escorted by a BP official to get access to the beach.

BP did not respond to requests for comment about the incident.

"For the police to tell me I needed to sign paperwork with BP to go to a public beach?" Mr. Lysiak said. "It's just irrational."

In the first few weeks after the oil rig explosion, BP kept a tight lid on images of the oil leaking into the gulf. Even when it released the first video of the spewing oil on May 12, it provided only a 30-second clip. The most detailed images did not become public until two weeks ago when BP gave members of Congress access to internal video feeds from its underwater rovers. Without BP's permission, some members of Congress displayed the video for news networks like CNN, which carried them live.

For journalists on the ground, particularly photographers who hire their own planes, one of the major sources of frustration has been the flight restrictions over the water, where access is off limits in a vast area from the Louisiana bayous to Pensacola, Fla. Each time they fly in the area, they have to be granted permission from the F.A.A.

"Although there's a tremendous amount of oil, finding out exactly where it's washing ashore or where booming is going on is very difficult," said John McCusker, a photographer with The Times-Picayune. "At 3,000 feet you're shooting through clouds, and it's difficult to tell the difference between an oil slick and a shadow from a cloud."

A spokeswoman for the agency, Laura J. Brown, said the flight restrictions are necessary to prevent civilian air traffic from interfering with aircraft assisting the response effort.

Ms. Brown also said the Coast Guard-F.A.A. command center that turned away Southern Seaplane was enforcing the essential-flights-only policy in place at the time; and she said the BP contractor who answered the phone was there because the F.A.A. operations center is in one of BP's buildings.

"That person was not making decisions about whether aircraft are allowed to enter the airspace," Ms. Brown said.

But the incident with Southern Seaplane is not the only example of journalists being told they cannot go somewhere simply because they are journalists. CBS News reported last month that one of its news crews was threatened with arrest for trying to film a public beach where oil had washed ashore. The Coast Guard said later that it was disappointed to learn of the incident.

Media access in disaster situations is always an issue. But the situation in the gulf is especially

nettlesome because journalists have to depend on the government and BP to gain access to so much of the affected area.

Michael Oreskes, senior managing editor at the Associated Press, likened the situation to reporters being embedded with the military in Afghanistan. "There is a continued effort to keep control over the access," Mr. Oreskes said. "And even in places where the government is cooperating with us to provide access, it's still a problem because it's still access obtained through the government."