

Correspondence from Fred Myers, Florence, Alabama, to Jim Evans, Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois, on November 22, 2013. Author is an honorary member of the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA).

Topic: Restrictions on agricultural photojournalism

Jim

The item in the latest ACDC news this morning regarding restrictions being placed on photographs made in public places got my attention.

This has concerned me for quite sometime, particularly by virtue of me having been a long time member of the American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP), an international organization that keeps an eye on such issues.

The trend of greater restriction has been a growing concern among ASMP members, especially freelance photographers who many times don't have the support of a major employer to supply them with the right credentials. It greatly affects photographers who rely on stock images for much of their income.

Not only is this arising from legal and privacy concerns but also from the far reaching effects resulting from actions of government agencies in the name of national security.

But this point has apparently been lost on those working in ag journalism.

Two years ago, I was in south Florida at the same time the Florida legislature was considering passing a law so restrictive that, for example, even photographing a distant farm from a public road or highway would be unlawful unless the photographer had first obtained written consent from the farm's owner. And it went downhill from there.

In response to that, I wrote an item for the AAEA ByLine in which I alerted everyone as to what was about to happen in Florida. I urged them to write or call the officials in Florida to object to the proposed legislation.

Although the item did appear in the ByLine, I didn't receive from a single AAEA member or any other reader of the ByLine. It was if it were a none-subject, nothing for all the good old boys in ag to be concerned about.

Luckily, cooler heads prevailed in Florida and the proposed legislation died in committee. Still, those in Florida who would have been directly affected if the law had passed said it was a close call.

Unfortunately, that was far from an isolated incident. Across the board, photographers are being increasingly restricted as to what they can document. At the same time and to briefly digress, I find it unconscionable the degree to which copyright protection is being compromised and violated.

For far too long, the ag press, suffering from what I describe as professional incest, has taken the unspoken position that it's so "different" that it need not consider what's happening in other sectors of the communications industry. It's as if the ag press is operating in some sort of microcosm. Maybe it did at one time. But even if it did, it no longer does.

Everyone in ag journalism best be aware of what has already happened and about to happen in the rest of the communication environment, then take a proactive stance against unreasonable measures that would unduly restrict them from gaining important access.

Somewhere in the ag press network there ought to be created a central source for the purpose of gathering, posting and referencing news concerning all existing and forthcoming restrictions along with details on how to counter pending or proposed legislation.

As we all know, once such laws are passed or restrictions are imposed, only rarely are they ever rescinded or relaxed.

This is longer than I intended. But I strongly believe this subject deserves a sense of urgency from everyone in ag journalism.

Best Regards,

Fred