

EDITORIALS

THE TENNESSEAN

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Beef against Oprah is a case of baloney

OPRAH Winfrey is guilty of being very popular.

And that about sums up the silly trial being conducted in Amarillo, Texas, involving the television personality.

Some members of the beef industry have sued Winfrey, saying a show she did regarding meat safety caused serious damage to their business. In April 1996, Winfrey and her guest, activist Howard Lyman were discussing meat safety on her show. Lyman described how animal parts fed to other animals could lead to mad cow disease being spread to humans. At one point in the show, Winfrey proclaimed, "It has just stopped me from eating another burger!"

And the beef industry had a cow.

Paul Engler, an Amarillo cattle feeder, and other plaintiffs claim they lost more than \$12 million as a result of the show. They are seeking unspecified damages, utilizing one of a rash of "veggie libel" laws, which attempt to prohibit damaging remarks about food products. The constitutionality of such laws, which now exist in 12 states, is highly suspect.

The cattle industry should try a better approach. For starters, concern about meat safety didn't begin and end with Oprah Winfrey. The public has seen in mainstream news for the past few years how bacteria in meat have caused serious illnesses. It could also be argued that beef prices were on a decline due to normal market influences. And if nothing else, people have become more health-

"Veggie libel" laws are constitutionally suspect

conscious about the effects of eating red meat.

But even if Winfrey's show did cause a drop in cattle prices, so what? There are endless factors that cause fluctuations in commodity prices.

The theme of the show was legitimate and the topic was responsible. Winfrey stated an opinion. Her audience had the option of agreeing or disagreeing. But Winfrey has a right to speak her mind. She also has the right to set an agenda if she chooses, just as Rush Limbaugh has a right to criticize Democrats, or Jay Leno to ridicule O.J. Simpson.

And the meat industry has the right to counter Winfrey in advertisements, speeches, appearances and, if it wants, a boycott of Winfrey's show.

But what the meat industry is really saying with this lawsuit is that it believes its own advertising can't match Winfrey's appeal. If that's the case, bully for her.

Her critics say free speech doesn't mean you have a right to yell "fire" in a crowded theater. They are right that free speech has a limit, but Winfrey's remarks didn't come anywhere close to that limit. The cattle hands want a scapegoat. They should come up with something better than that. ■



King Day reminds of what's at stake

To the Editor:

As I write this on Martin L. King Day, the federal and buildings are closed for the part, schools are not in session, professionals work on, oblivious the moment that requests our and reconsideration.

University classes are still in session, marketeers are busy, marketers are researching, a host of professionals from attorneys to physicians are busy "catching" in their offices.

Unless you know better, then few people who really do "over" into the world of race, make it a part of their daily social living, giving this day particular special meaning.

Some are married to people