

# 'VEGGIE LIBEL,' FREE SPEECH'S SCOURGE

In 1993, the Georgia General Assembly made it illegal for a Georgia citizen to criticize a perishable food product.

This was House Bill of 124 of 1993. Rep. Henry L. Reaves of Quitman sponsored the bill. He was then Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. Gov. Zell Miller signed the bill into law.

The passage of this law helped spark the formation of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation, to attempt to restore in the 13th colony an emphasis on press freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment.

Here is the text of the statute that flouts freedom of speech in Georgia:

2-16-3. Disparagement of perishable food products or commodities

Any person who produces, markets, or sells a perishable food product or commodity and suffers damage as a result of another person's disparagement of such perishable food products or commodities has a cause of action for damages and for any other relief a court of competent jurisdiction deems appropriate, including, but not limited to, compensatory and punitive damages.

Source: [www.legis.state.ga.us](http://www.legis.state.ga.us)

Downloaded: October 2003

According to Presstime magazine, the American Feed Industry Association hired the Washington, D.C., law firm of Olsson, Frank & Weeda in 1992 to draft a model agricultural product disparagement law. The American Farm Bureau Federation encouraged its state affiliates to lobby legislators for such laws.

Georgia and 13 other states adopted these laws, according to Presstime. Their laws followed closely the text of the model legislation written in Washington, D.C.

According to the Associated Press, "the laws arose after apple growers unsuccessfully sued CBS' '60 Minutes' over a 1989 segment about the health effects of the spray Alar.

"Farmers and food companies say they need protection against unsubstantiated claims that can cost them millions of dollars by scaring consumers."

In the decade since its passage in Georgia, "veggie libel" has never been challenged. No one has introduced a bill to revoke it.