

A.H. Belo Ordered To Pay \$58 Million In Libel Lawsuit

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DALLAS—A.H. Belo Corp. said that a Waco, Texas, jury awarded a former district attorney \$58 million in a libel lawsuit against its broadcasting subsidiary and a former reporter for its Dallas television station.

Media-law specialists said the damages are the largest ever awarded against a media company in a libel case. Damages in libel cases frequently are reduced by the trial judge or an appeals court.

Victor F. Feazell, former McLennan County district attorney, sued Belo Broadcasting Corp. and reporter Charles Duncan in 1986 in state court in Waco. He charged that Mr. Duncan ruined his reputation in a 10-part series that accused Mr. Feazell of taking kickbacks to settle drunken-driving charges. The series, which ran in 1985, was followed by a commentary by one of the station's anchors.

Mr. Feazell was indicted on bribery and racketeering charges in September 1986, after the series ran and just before he was to run for re-election. He was acquitted of all the charges in June 1987. In an interview, Mr. Feazell, who has argued that the news stories prompted the indictments, said the verdict vindicates him and "sends a message to the rest of the media to get your facts straight."

Belo, a television and newspaper concern that owns WFAA-TV in Dallas, said it believes there isn't a "factual basis to support this jury verdict, which involves a public official." The company said it will ask for a new trial, among other motions, and if necessary, will appeal.

The company also said that the verdict, if upheld, wouldn't impact its financial results or its financial condition, but it didn't elaborate. Belo recently reported a first-quarter loss of \$1.9 million, or 10 cents a share, on revenue of \$94.2 million. It blamed the loss on beefed-up coverage and lower advertising revenue related to the Persian Gulf war.

The jury's verdict included \$17 million in actual damages, including \$2 million in damage to Mr. Feazell's business, \$9 million in damage to his reputation and \$6 million for personal humiliation. The \$41 million in punitive damages included \$1 million assessed to Mr. Duncan.