

# 'Hillbillies' Reality Show Draws More Protest

When Viacom shareholders gather in Manhattan May 21, they'll have company: people protesting Viacom division CBS' planned reality show, "The Real Beverly Hillbillies."

Cecil Roberts, president of the [United Mine Workers of America](#), and Dee Davis, president of the [Center for Rural Strategies](#), plan to be there. So does a vanload of concerned citizens from central Appalachia.

"We'd love to be invited in for a cup of coffee," Tim Marema, vice president of the Whitesburg, Ky.-based Center for Rural Strategies, told EthicsDaily.com. "We want to get as far up the food chain as possible."

Controversy surrounding the proposed reality show began in August 2002, when Hollywood trade publication *Daily Variety* first carried news of CBS' plan to give its 1962-1971 show, "The Beverly Hillbillies," the reality twist.

The network said it planned to transplant country folks to a Beverly Hills mansion for a year and document the fish-out-of-water experience for a reality show.

The news crept through entertainment briefs and eventually turned into a blip on the radar of the center, a non-profit organization just over two years old.

CBS began distributing fliers across the Southeast, from North Carolina to Missouri, soliciting interested parties.

Marema said the production company held "tryouts" at various locations across the South, and that some people did attend. However, "the search, to the best of our understanding, is not active right now," said Marema.

That inactivity may well be due to the center's efforts, which have created ripples

of protest across the country.

“We knew people who were upset and were contacting CBS, saying, ‘What are your intentions with this show?’” Marema said CBS, out one side of its corporate mouth, was saying it wanted to respect people; out the other side, the network was imagining how funny it would be when the show’s family interviewed the maid.

The center decided to take action, beginning with [newspaper advertisements](#)—in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and others—in January.

“The idea was to get their attention,” said Marema. “It was more than just a bad TV show. It could do actual harm in the long run to the perceptions of rural people.”

The advertising blitz helped.

“Their line, before we started this campaign, was ‘Hahaha, isn’t this going to be funny,’” said Marema. That began to change, though the show proposal didn’t disappear.

The center’s president and attorney met with CBS President Les Moonves in February. Moonves said CBS didn’t intend to make fun of people.

“They just didn’t believe that people would be that upset about the show,” Marema said, “and that we did really have a case to make.”

But the center always maintained there was a case, and the protest expanded into Congress and the labor movement.

In March, 44 members of the U.S. House of Representatives sent [a letter](#) to Moonves, asking him to “immediately suspend all efforts to develop this offensive and distasteful show.”

“Mr. Moonves, we would like to remind you that CBS has a duty to provide

responsible and ethical programming,” the letter read. “Any television show that seeks to humiliate and exploit a group of Americans clearly does not meet those standards and must not be allowed to continue. Again, we ask that you put an end to this poorly conceived program immediately.”

Letters also went to Viacom and CBS from the [United Steel Workers of America](#), [United Mine Workers of America](#), [Communications Workers of America](#) and [Association of Flight Attendants](#).

[The letter](#) from USWA International President Leo W. Gerard read, in part: “Poverty and lack of education may be a joke to those who select television programming, but they are not to the millions of working poor in this country who strive to live their lives with dignity and pride.”

“The realities of poverty, unemployment, workplace hazards, hunger and inadequate education and healthcare deserve fair and thoughtful treatment, not mockery,” the letter continued.

The press picked up the mounting protest, and the snowball grew.

John O’Brien, a native of Appalachia, wrote an [opinion piece](#) for the *New York Times* in which he said: “The reality show that CBS is considering not only exploits my part of the world, it also separates struggling Appalachians from the rest of the American poor. If a television network proposed a ‘real life’ show treating poor African-Americans, Latinos, American Indians, Asians or Jews as curiosities, they, and all Americans of good will, would be justifiably outraged.”

A *Los Angeles Times* editorial took the planned show to task as well:

“Here’s a better idea: Let’s take four or five TV execs out of Bel-Air and drop them into a small Tennessee or Montana town. Have cameras follow their Italian shoes everywhere. See how long these urban galoots survive in a place where a handshake is a steel bond, where mocha is a color and grande is a real good time.”

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75/ May 19, 2003 Cliff Vaughn**

A message left at CBS offices seeking comment was not returned.

However, [CBS spokesman Chris Ender told Associated Press](#), “The proposed series continues to generate a lot of attention, but at this point the show doesn’t actually exist.”

“There is no cast and not a frame of film has been shot,” he said. “We haven’t even made a decision to move forward yet.”

The protestors set for Manhattan hope they won’t, and so do other observers.

Gary Farley, partner in the Center for Rural Church Leadership in Carrollton, Ala., told EthicsDaily.com: “Many of us have come to realize that humor that depends on demeaning others is not Christian. So, I would hope that we might get our laughs in some other way.”

Marema said, “Rural people in our organization can certainly take a joke.” However, “People will think that’s reality and our nation will respond that way—with either ridicule or pity. And neither of those makes a good response to the problems in rural America.”

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