



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

March 5, 2024

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

SB 1055

Agriculture - Roosters – Restrictions

FAVORABLE

The Humane Society of the United States, on behalf of our supporters across Maryland, requests a favorable report on SB 1055. This legislation would advance animal welfare and protect public health by creating a simpler mechanism to address the ills of cockfighting in our state.

Cockfighting is a widespread criminal industry in the U.S. and, despite its strong cockfighting laws, Maryland is not immune. For example, in May of 2022, a Baltimore County man was convicted of running a cockfighting operation in Harford County. Detectives seized 209 birds from his property, as well as evidence indicative of a cockfighting operation. Indeed, images of his property showed evidence of a gamefowl yard – a tract of land specifically used for breeding and selling birds for fighting.

In 2019, a Montgomery County man was charged with 22 counts of aggravated animal cruelty after law enforcement removed more than 100 roosters and hens from his property. Several of the birds' combs and wattles were reportedly removed, which is indicative of cockfighting. Images of his property similarly showed evidence of a gamefowl yard.

This legislation will help address these cockfighting crimes, and specifically the gamefowl yards, by offering a strong compliment to existing state cockfighting laws. The bill provides a misdemeanor penalty under the Agriculture Code for the possession of more than 5 adult roosters per acre, or 25 total, on a parcel of property. Maryland needs this new provision to cut off the most profitable aspect of cockfighting – the breeding and sale of fighting birds.

In a typical cockfighting sales operation, adult roosters are bred and raised for the purpose of fighting. They are maintained outside with minimal shelter and then illegally sold for hundreds or thousands of dollars to cockfighters both domestically and internationally.

This bill is needed to address these illicit operations because, under current law, it is exceedingly difficult to prove birds are possessed with the intent to fight them. As there is essentially no reason to possess a significant number of adult roosters other than for cockfighting, this bill does not impact any commercial farmer. Finally, to ensure there are no

unintended consequences, the bill provides exceptions for commercial poultry operations, animal shelters and rescues, and 4-H and Future Farmers of America projects.

Cockfighting is an important crime to address because it is a cruel and inexcusable practice that profits from violent cruelty to animals. It involves pitting two animals with metal weapons attached to their legs to fight to the death for the purpose of profit, gambling, and entertainment.

In addition, as law enforcement can attest, cockfighting is often associated with other criminal activities such as drug trafficking, gang activity, and illegal weapon sales. Cockfighting has even been associated with organized crime and human trafficking.

Maybe most importantly to this committee, cockfighting is also a risk to Maryland's poultry industry because gamefowl are associated with the spread of avian diseases. For example, gamefowl are a high-risk disease vector for avian flu because they are raised without protection from wild birds, transported across the country without oversight, and often exposed to bloody birds under stressful fighting conditions. As members of the committee are well aware, avian flu has been devastating to the U.S. poultry industry, including in Maryland.

There are recent examples in Maryland of the direct connection between cockfighting and avian disease. In a 2015 Anne Arundel County case, an Odenton man faced 89 cockfighting related charges and 67 counts of animal cruelty. The Maryland Department of Agriculture ordered all 270 birds seized in the case euthanized after testing allegedly found two serious viruses and bacterial infections. More recently, in a 2022 cockfighting case in Calvert County, seized birds reportedly tested positive for laryngotracheitis -- an acute, highly contagious, herpesvirus infection of chickens.

Agriculture experts agree on the risk cockfighting poses to the poultry industry. The USDA's Inspector General testified to Congress that, "Birds utilized in animal fighting competitions present a health risk to humans and animals because the birds may carry infectious diseases such as Exotic Newcastle Disease and AI [avian influenza]." The National Chicken Council testified in support of the Federal Animal Fighting Prohibition Act calling cockfighting "an inhumane practice that presents a continuing threat to the health of commercial flocks".

For all these reasons, we urge you to support SB 1055 to protect animals, our communities, and the poultry industry from the clearly detrimental aspects of cockfighting.