

March 5, 2024

This testimony is on behalf of The Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association (HSVMA), a national association of approximately 9,000 veterinary professionals with a focus on animal welfare. I write to express the HSVMA's strong support for SB 1055, legislation in the Agriculture Code to combat Maryland cockfighting operations by limiting the number of adult roosters who may be maintained on a parcel of property.

Despite Maryland's strong animal fighting laws, gamefowl yard owners in the state illegally raise and sell adult roosters for the purpose of cockfighting.

Cockfighting involves forcing two animals with metal weapons attached to their legs to fight to the death. Kids are also often involved, desensitizing them to the suffering of others. There is no excuse for this barbaric and illegal activity that causes extreme animal cruelty and degrades our communities.

Moreover, cockfighters who breed roosters for fighting can easily maintain hundreds of birds outside with no vaccinations, regulatory oversight, or protection from wild birds – creating a significant risk of avian disease contagion. Recently, as you may know, avian influenza has caused bird flu outbreaks in 49 states, including Maryland where it has affected nearly 2 million commercial and backyard birds.

Gamefowl may also be a health risk to people because they are associated with infections including salmonella, campylobacter, and E. coli. These infections are common in chickens and do not always cause illness in the birds, but infections in people often results in illness, hospitalization and even death.

The legislation is an appropriate remedy to the detrimental aspects of cockfighting because there is essentially no reason to possess a significant number of roosters other than for the purpose of cockfighting. Also, the sale of gamefowl both domestically and internationally is often the most profitable aspect of the illegal cockfighting industry.

Finally, there is no reason to believe there will be unintended consequences with this legislation. Commercial poultry operations are exempt and, even though smaller broiler operations could have more than 5 roosters, the birds would be killed before they are adults. Also, the legislation does not apply to gamebirds used for hunting – such as pheasants and quail -- which are different than gamefowl, which are used for cockfighting.

There is no purpose in possessing a significant number of roosters other than for cockfighting. The sale of gamefowl, both domestically and internationally for hundreds or thousands of dollars is often the most profitable aspect of the illegal cockfighting industry.

Based on all the arguments above, we encourage you help Maryland get out of the cockfighting business by voting in favor of SB 1055.

Sincerely,

Gail R. Hansen DVM, MPH
Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association