



Formerly called the Humane
Society of the United States and
Humane Society International

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Environment and Transportation Committee
SB375 - Agriculture - Roosters – Restrictions
FAVORABLE

On behalf of our members and supporters in Maryland, Humane World for Animals, formerly called the Humane Society of the United States, enthusiastically supports SB375. For the sake of animal welfare and public health, we urge the Environment and Transportation committee to vote in favor of SB375 – legislation to address cockfighting operations in our state.

Cockfighting is a widespread criminal industry in the U.S., and, despite its strong cockfighting laws, Maryland is not immune. Although there are no official records on the number of gamefowl yards in the state, we can get a sense of the scope from an on-line research project by HSUS. Over three months, HSUS researchers discovered evidence of a gamefowl yard(s) in ten of 23 Maryland counties -- Anne Arundel, Calvert, Harford, Montgomery, Carroll, Somerset, Caroline, Wicomico, Howard, and Washington. Undoubtedly there are many more.

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. Images of his property showed unmistakable 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 twenty-two counts of aggravated animal cruelty after law enforcement removed more than one hundred roosters and hens from his property. Many of the birds' combs and wattles were removed, which is indicative of cockfighting. Images of his property similarly showed evidence of a gamefowl yard.

SB375 will help address these cockfighting crimes, and specifically 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 five adult roosters per acre, or twenty-five total, on a parcel of property. Maryland needs this new provision to cut off the most profitable aspect of cockfighting -- the 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. SB375 is a fair way to address these illicit operations because, under current law, it is exceedingly difficult to prove birds are possessed with the intent to fight them. Also, there is no reason to possess a substantial number of adult roosters other than for cockfighting.

To ensure there are no unintended consequences, the legislation provides exceptions for commercial poultry operations, animal shelters and rescues, 4-H and Future Farmers of America projects. In a change from last year, it also only applies to those who maintain their roosters tethered or caged. 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.

Please contact Maryland State Director Stacey Volodin with any questions at svolodin@humaneworld.org



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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.

Particularly 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 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 eighty-nine cockfighting related charges and sixty-seven 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."

The committee will see that SB375 incorporates amendments created in by the esteemed Natural Resources, Agriculture & Open Space subcommittee for cross-file HB513. We believe these amendments make the bill better and stronger and emphatically support their adoption.

For all these reasons, Humane World for Animals urges you to support SB375 and protect animals, our communities, and the poultry industry from the clearly detrimental effects of cockfighting.

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