



February 25, 2025

The Honorable Brian J. Feldman, Chair  
Environment & Transportation Committee  
2 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: SB 375 – Agriculture - Roosters – Restrictions – (Cockfighting) **FAVORABLE**

Dear Chairman Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan and Members of the Committee:

I am Wayne Pacelle, a resident of Maryland and president of the Center for a Humane Economy, headquartered in Maryland, and Animal Wellness Action. I write in support of SB 375 to combat cockfighting. SB 375 complements prohibitions against cockfighting by imposing limits on the number of roosters anyone can have, with appropriate exemptions for legitimate agricultural operations.

This policy addresses the problem of cockfighters masquerading as breeders of “brood fowl” or “game fowl.” It is necessary to address the crime, disease spread, cruelty, and noise disturbances built into the marrow of cockfighting.

Why a strengthened statewide law is needed: 1) Cockfighting is barbaric; 2) It is bound up with other forms of organized crime, such as drug trafficking, illegal gambling, and money laundering; 3) It threatens to spread avian disease to commercial flocks of laying hens and broiler birds (multi-billion dollar industries in Maryland) and to bird hobbyists; and 4) It costs taxpayers hundreds of millions when disease breaks out, with [cockfighters in other states having reaped millions](#) in compensation payments for their criminal conduct.

Background: Maryland has [a long and troubled history](#) associated with cockfighting. Maryland [did not explicitly ban cockfighting until 1983](#), with a [Cecil County judge tossing out charges](#) against two cockfighters because the state’s anti-cruelty law did not specifically prohibit the practice. According to [The Washington Post](#) story about the debate in 1983, debate was robust before lawmakers finally adopted a comprehensive statute to forbid the activity, with a phalanx of in-state cockfighters openly attending hearings, talking about the long tradition of cockfighting in Maryland, and opposing the bill. Given that Maryland was one of just seven states at the time with legal cockfighting until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is not surprising that cockfighting has remained a problem in Maryland. There are illegal fights in Maryland, but there is also a disturbingly widespread cockfighting breeding industry, where cockfighters maintain roosters on tethers or in cages and “farm” the birds for cockfights in the state or for transport to other states, territories, and nations.

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*Building a humane economy, one company at a time.*

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*Helping animals by promoting legal standards forbidding cruelty.*

### **Cockfighting is barbaric and it is illegal.**

In staged fights, roosters have knives or gaffs (curved ice-pick-like implements) strapped to their legs and they slash each other to death. The birds suffer gouged eyes, punctured lungs, and other grievous wounds for human entertainment and illegal gambling – not unlike the human and animal battles staged during Roman times at the Colosseum. Federal law bans it everywhere in the U.S., and most states themselves banned it in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There is no mistaking birds used for cockfighting from birds used in production agriculture. 1) Cockfighting birds are distinct breeds, such as Kelso, Hatches, and Sweaters, and they are beautifully colored and have a different stature and athletic frame than broiler birds or laying hens. 2) In terms of housing, fighting roosters are separated from other birds because of their aggression, and that distinguishes them from laying hens (females) and broiler birds (either sex) which are kept in flocks. Fighting birds are almost always kept on tethers, attached to small blue barrels or A-frame huts, or in cages. 3) Broiler birds in industrial-style operations are killed six weeks of age, and the fighting birds are adult roosters, six months and up, while the laying hens do typically live well past six months, but they are females.

### **Cockfighting is often bound up with cartels and other organized crime associations.**

Anyone wishing to sell gamefowl to other cockfighters must fight them to demonstrate that they are a capable breeder and cockfighter. It is the sale of birds for fighting that generates the primary commerce in cockfighting, with some birds going for as much as \$2,000 each. This is precisely why it is crucial to shut down the fighting farms in Maryland.

There are millions of birds trafficked in the United States and abroad every year, including sales to more than 25 other nations. The primary destinations for fighting gamecocks are Mexico and the Philippines, with regular spillover of violence at cockfighting. American cockfighters are the main suppliers of cockfighting birds for the cartels in Mexico.

- In December 2024, there were four murdered at a Mexican cockfighting arena, including “El Chabelo,” a [leader of the Sinaloa Cartel](#).
- In November 2024, cockfighting enthusiast and son-in-law of [cartel leader “El Mencho”](#) [arrested](#) in Riverside County.
- In late January 2024, there were 14 wounded and six murdered, including a [16-year-old from eastern Washington](#) at a cockfighting derby in the Mexican state of Guerrero.
- Months before, also in Mexico, 20 people were [massacred](#) at a cockfighting derby, including a Chicago woman.
- Organized crime controls the cockfighting venues in the Philippines, too, with [32 people kidnapped](#) from cockfights in 2022 and never found. In the Philippines in 2022, there was an estimated [\\$13 billion wagered](#) on online cockfights (e-sabong).
- Last April, there was a mass shooting at a Hawaii cockfight, with two dead and three wounded.
- The National Sheriffs’ Association and the National Districts’ Attorneys Association have endorsed national legislation to crack down on animal fighting because the problem is so severe. In its [June 2024 endorsement of national legislation to crack down on cockfighting and dogfighting](#), here is what the NSA had to say:

- the FBI included dogfighting and cockfighting in the National Incident Based Reporting System (Code 720) as a Crime against Society; classified with crimes like arson, burglary, and other property crimes;
- dogfighting and cockfighting have links to crimes against people including, but not limited to, child abuse, murder, assault, theft, intimidation of neighbors and witnesses, and human trafficking;
- animal fighting investigations have uncovered intricate criminal networks and connections to organized crime, trafficking narcotics, illegal firearms, and attempted bribery of elected officials;
- dogfighting and cockfighting events present a danger to responding officers due to the often-large numbers of attendees, many of whom are armed;
- people who participate in animal fighting often engage children in illegal activity causing them to witness or participate in violence;
- and well-funded pro-dogfighting and pro-cockfighting organizations donate to the campaigns of elected officials, hire professional lobby firms, and attempt to influence legislators to prevent the passage of new laws or amend existing laws to reduce penalties and/or decriminalize animal fighting crimes altogether.

### **Cockfighting, tied to avian diseases, threatens our billion-dollar poultry industry.**

Cockfighting drives outbreaks of serious poultry and zoonotic diseases especially *virulent Newcastle disease (vND)* and *highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI, “bird flu”)* viruses, the [two most important diseases of poultry worldwide](#).

Gamefowl are high-risk disease vectors and reservoirs because they are widely sold and traded, deliberately mixed under stressful conditions at fighting derbies, reared under poor biosecurity, and employ husbandry or fighting practices that spread disease. A statewide policy on possession of large number of adult roosters is a critical hedge against the spread of avian diseases.

- HPAI and vND spread widely and quickly and can kill virtually every [wild bird species](#) and all poultry. Neither virus is normally present in the U.S. When outbreaks occur, these viruses are controlled by lethal depopulation, sometimes resulting in the killing of millions of birds.
- [Ten of the 15 US vND outbreaks originated from illegally smuggled gamefowl for cockfighting from Mexico](#). These outbreaks have prompted the depopulation of tens of millions of birds, with indemnity payments from the United States exceeding a billion dollars.
  - The ongoing U.S. Dec 2021-present bird flu epidemic has killed 155 million poultry, including more than 115 million laying hens. This epidemic is now found in 486 species and can now be considered endemic, rather than a foreign animal disease. It is the most expensive animal disease outbreak in U.S. history, with USDA outlays of \$2 billion. The price of eggs has swelled by \$2 a dozen, adding \$20 billion in costs for American consumers.
  - An outbreak of virulent Newcastle Disease in southern California that started in mid-2018 resulted in the killing of more than 1.2 million birds and the expenditure of about \$100 million. USDA reported that 470 premises in California have been infected with Newcastle disease, including 262 in Riverside County, 158 in San Bernardino County, and 46 in Los Angeles County.
  - In the 2014-2015 U.S. HPAI H5 epidemic, 50.4 million commercial layers, and turkeys died or were euthanized in 21 states causing economic losses of \$3.3 billion.

- In the early 2000s, California public health officials [identified cockfighting operations](#) as the likely vector for the transmission of the avian influenza, which [spread from California into Arizona and Nevada](#). Before it was contained, state and federal authorities killed 3.2 million birds and spent \$170 million. Authorities estimated there were thousands of backyard cockfighting operations in Los Angeles County alone.
- In an astonishing circumstance, the state and federal government [paid out tens of millions of dollars to cockfighters](#) in compensation when their fighting birds were killed after disease outbreaks, enriching cockfighters. Whether or not it's warranted to make payments to cockfighters during a disease outbreak, it's best not to have these illegal flocks in the first place. Collectively, they amount to a moral and financial liability for the state.
- HPAI is worse than vND because [the bird flu virus easily mutates and can infect and kill people](#). A bird flu outbreak launched or sustained by cockfighting could lead to a zoonotic avian influenza plague more harmful than the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a virus that is built to mutate.

**SB 375 flags cockfighters, allowing them to exit enterprise, without felony penalties.** Penalties for this new crime of illegal possession of large numbers of adult roosters are far less severe than penalties for prohibited cockfighting crimes detailed in the animal fighting statute. This gives individuals a chance to get out of the business of cockfighting without provoking a felony-level penalty should they be caught knowingly selling, transporting, or possessing fighting birds, or actually participating in a fight.

Please also review the additional addenda below my signature.

For the aforementioned reasons, I urge a favorable report on SB 375.

Sincerely,



Wayne Pacelle, President  
Center for A Humane Economy  
Animal Wellness Action, CEO

#### **Addenda:**

#### **Cockfighting cases in Maryland and evidence of robust trade in fighting birds.**

On January 12, 2024, a Calvert County District Court Judge convicted a man from Huntingtown, of 10 felony animal cruelty charges relating to training, transporting, and selling fighting birds. Neighbors reported that he maintained a large cockfighting yard and was disturbed the peace. [Animal Wellness Action Applauds Calvert County State's Attorney's Office for District Court Filing against Alleged Cockfighter.](#)

In 2022, a Harford County man was convicted of multiple counts of animal cruelty and possessing birds for cockfighting. According to the State's Attorney's Office, a man from Street Maryland pled guilty to 20 counts of animal cruelty and 20 counts of possessing a bird for cockfighting. The defendant had been under investigation since May 2021, after Harford County Animal Control received a complaint about a cockfighting ring, and the investigation turned up evidence of more than 100 roosters, who had been "dubbed," which means their comb, wattles, and earlobes were removed, to prevent injury while fighting. Officers also found a cockfighting ring and a "sparring puppet" used to train the roosters to fight each other.

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.

Shipments to Guam: Animal Wellness Action obtained avian shipping records to Guam and uncovered more than 11,500 fighting birds from the states to this distant U.S. territory over a recent five-year period. This amounts to just a fraction of the illegal movements of fighting birds. We estimate that hundreds of thousands of birds are raised in Maryland and other states and shipped to Mexico, where cartels control the cockfighting venues.

#### **Legal status of cockfighting U.S. law:**

United States law: [Federal law](#) makes it a felony to sponsor or exhibit an animal in a fighting venture; sell, buy, possess, train, transport, deliver, or receive an animal in an animal venture; traffic in knives or gaffs for fighting; or use the mail service of the U.S. Postal Service, or advertising an animal for use in a fighting venture. It is a misdemeanor to attend a fight. The federal FIGHT Act is now proposed in Congress, and it has strong bipartisan support to enhance enforcement mechanisms to crack down on cockfighting and dogfighting.

Maryland Endorsers of the FIGHT Act: Dorchester County State's Attorney's Office, Frederick County Sheriff's Office, Frederick County State's Attorney's Office, Howard County State's Attorney's Office, Queen Anne County's Office of the Sheriff, Queen Anne County State's Attorney, Wicomico County Sheriff's Office.