

# **Maryland Cockfighting -Testimony on SB 375--County**

Uploaded by: Dr. Jim Keen

Position: FAV



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:

My name is Jim Keen. I am an agricultural and animal protection veterinarian with a Ph.D. in infectious disease epidemiology. I have 37 years of experience as a food animal clinician, a veterinary infectious disease researcher with USDA in Nebraska, and as faculty at the University of Nebraska School of Veterinary Medicine.

I am currently the Director of Veterinary Science at the Center for a Humane Economy, an animal protection non-profit. I live in eastern South Dakota, but I have two brothers and their families who live in Bethesda, Maryland.

*I urge the Maryland House of Delegates Environment and Transportation Committee to support SB 375. This bill would sensibly limit the number of roosters on a property and is a modest and reasonable legislative proposal similar already adopted proposal that limits rooster numbers, for example, in Los Angeles County in California. SB 375 has appropriate exemptions for legitimate agricultural operations.*

There are many downsides to excessive numbers of roosters on a property. These include noise from incessant crowing, danger from injury to people (especially children) and pets from their natural aggression and territoriality, unsanitary conditions leading to bad odors and zoonotic disease risks (e.g. salmonellosis and bird flu), and negative impacts on property values.

*However, the greatest concern with and risk from large numbers of roosters on a property, especially of game fowl breeds, is that the birds are being raised, trained, and sold for the illegal cockfighting industry. Cockfighting is prevalent in America, but it is underground and hidden. There are an estimated 150,000 game fowl farms in the United States which raise 20 to 25 million birds for fighting each year.*

Cockfighting is a brutal and inhumane bloodsport where roosters are forced to fight to the death or serious injury for entertainment and gambling. It is illegal in all 50 US states and territories. Cockfighting

Center for a Humane Economy | P.O. Box 30845 | Bethesda, MD 20824  
*Building a humane economy, one company at a time.*

Animal Wellness Action | 611 Pennsylvania Ave. S.E., #136 | Washington, D.C. 20003  
*Helping animals by promoting legal standards forbidding cruelty.*

is a “cluster crime” often associated with other illegal activities such as gambling, drug trafficking, organized crime, and sex trafficking. Having fighting roosters on a property will attract these unwanted elements to a town or neighborhood.

An irksome problem is that while cockfighting activity is illegal in all 50 States and territories and it is unlawful to possess birds for fighting, *it is not illegal to raise, own, or sell cockfighting breeds*. This dilemma impedes law enforcement and judiciary action and allows cockfighters to “*hide in plain sight*” by falsely claiming they raise their birds for “show or exhibition”.

It also allows cockfighters to use the U.S. postal service to ship their birds nationwide or internationally by the thousands and to use legitimate government-subsidized poultry health programs like the National Poultry Improvement Plan to screen their flocks for disease. This quandary makes controlling, prosecuting, and punishing illegal cockfighting a challenge. SB 375 can help to *close or shrink this loophole by making it difficult or illegal to raise large numbers of cockfighting roosters*.

Not all persons who raise game fowl breeds are cockfighters, but the thousands of backyard farms that raise fighting cocks are very easy to identify.

- *Game fowl breeds* (e.g. Kelso, Hatch, Roundhead) are readily identifiable by their striking appearance (brilliantly colored feathers, lean muscular bodies, long legs, and vertical stance), and highly aggressive behavior that is very different from typical backyard e.g.- laying or meat (broiler) chicken breeds. Their combs and wattles are often surgically altered or removed to prevent injury during fights, while their spurs may be pruned or artificially sharpened to allow fitting with knives or gaffes.
- *Game cock farm setup and practices*: Unlike backyard flocks with poultry raised for legitimate agriculture purposes, game cock farms will have dozens, hundreds, and sometimes thousands of brilliantly colored Sweaters, Kelsos, and other breeds tethered to A-frame huts or barrels. Farms may be secretive about their operations and restrict visitors. They will have an unusually high rooster-to-hen ratio, unlike legitimate farms that have many more hens than roosters (egg-laying farms) or similar numbers of males and females (broiler farms). Game cocks are raised in individual pens or tied to stakes to prevent fighting. Other markers of cockfighter farms are the presence of training equipment (e.g. treadmills), and medications and supplements for fighting performance enhancement.

Many social pathologies are cogs in the cockfighting criminal ecosystem. However, as a veterinarian and epidemiologist, I can vouch that, in addition to horrible animal cruelty, serious poultry and zoonotic disease risks are constant companions of cockfighting.

- Virulent Newcastle disease (vND), along with Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI or “Bird Flu”) are the two worst avian diseases on the planet. The U.S. is normally free of both vND and bird flu i.e. they are considered “foreign animal diseases”. These two viral diseases are so deadly and contagious that rapid depopulation is almost always employed by the USDA and State agriculture departments to control them.
- Both vND and HPAI outbreaks are strongly linked epidemiologically to cockfighting activities either at fighting derbies or at game fowl farms where the birds are raised and trained. While all vND and HPAI outbreaks or epidemics are *not* a direct result of cockfighting, the poor biosecurity and other high disease-risk practices of the cockfighting industry (e.g. bird smuggling, bird mixing at fights, hiding birds from surveillance or depopulation, under-utilizing veterinary services, outdoor housing allowing wild bird contact) will always, at a minimum, prolong and worsen vND and HPIA outbreaks.

- The potential disease threat and economic damage from perhaps 25 million (M) U.S. cockfighting game fowl asymmetrically puts all 9 billion commercial broilers, 330 million layers, 217 million turkeys, and millions of backyard poultry and wild birds in our nation at some risk.
- Ten of 15 vND outbreaks in the U.S. were linked to the illegal smuggling of infected game cocks across our southern border, at a cost of many millions of dead poultry and more than a billion in tax dollars.
- For six weeks in Spring 2003, I was deployed to Orange County to help control the enormous Southern California vND outbreak. I primarily worked in South Central Los Angeles and peri-urban LA County where there were many small-scale mixed poultry and livestock operations and rancheros. Many of these small farms raised fighting cocks, and many of these cockfighting farms were infected with Newcastle disease and euthanized.
- *Of even greater concern than vND is the ongoing Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza H5N1 virus pandemic.* This bird flu virus has directly killed or caused the euthanasia of 156 million U.S. poultry over the past three years, including 121 million layers, 18 million turkeys, and 3.5 million broilers in 722 commercial and 809 backyard flocks. *This includes 828,000 commercial broilers in Maryland in January and early February 2025.*
- Millions of wild birds and thousands of wild mammals have also died from bird flu in the U.S. and many more millions globally. More than a million U.S. dairy cattle have become infected with H5N1 in the past year and about 70 dairy cattle and poultry workers.
- [Cockfighting is a known major means of bird flu virus spread](#), as many persons involved in cockfighting activity also work in commercial poultry operations. Unfortunately, [the USDA does not report cockfighting operations among the 809 “backyard flocks” so far infected with H5N1 bird flu](#), but I am certain there have been many infected cockfighting farms.

In closing, for the health and welfare of the people and poultry in Maryland, please support SB 375 to restrict rooster ownership and thereby help to control the many scourges arising from cockfighting. This brutal blood sport has no place in our civilized and civil society. I also invite you to review [a detailed report on the role of cockfighting as a vector of virulent Newcastle disease and bird flu H5N1](#) that I co-wrote with my veterinary colleague Dr. Tom Pool.

Thank you.

Jim Keen, DVM, PhD

Director of Veterinary Science

Center for a Humane Economy

Email: [jim.keen@animalwellmessaction.org](mailto:jim.keen@animalwellmessaction.org)

Phone: 605-999-7080

# **HSUS 2024 research MD gamefowl 5.pdf**

Uploaded by: Jennifer Bevan-Dangel

Position: FAV

# Maryland Gamefowl Report - Update

## HSUS Research and Analysis | December 2024

### INTRODUCTION

The HSUS has conducted research into gamefowl yards in Maryland to determine their prevalence in the state. Gamefowl yards are tracts of land where hundreds of birds are bred and sold for the purpose of cockfighting. This report summarizes research to document the number of gamefowl yards in Maryland and their location.

Because cockfighting is a criminal industry, there are no official records to document how many gamefowl yards are in Maryland. Consequently, any estimate of the number of gamefowl yards in the state must acknowledge we are able to identify only a portion of them. Nevertheless, this report presents evidence that numerous gamefowl yards exist throughout Maryland.

The following are key highlights:

Of the 23 counties in Maryland, our research found evidence of suspected gamefowl yards in 10 of them: Anne Arundel, Calvert, Harford, Montgomery, Carroll, Somerset, Caroline, Wicomico, Howard and Washington.

### MAPS – MARYLAND COUNTIES WITH ARRESTS

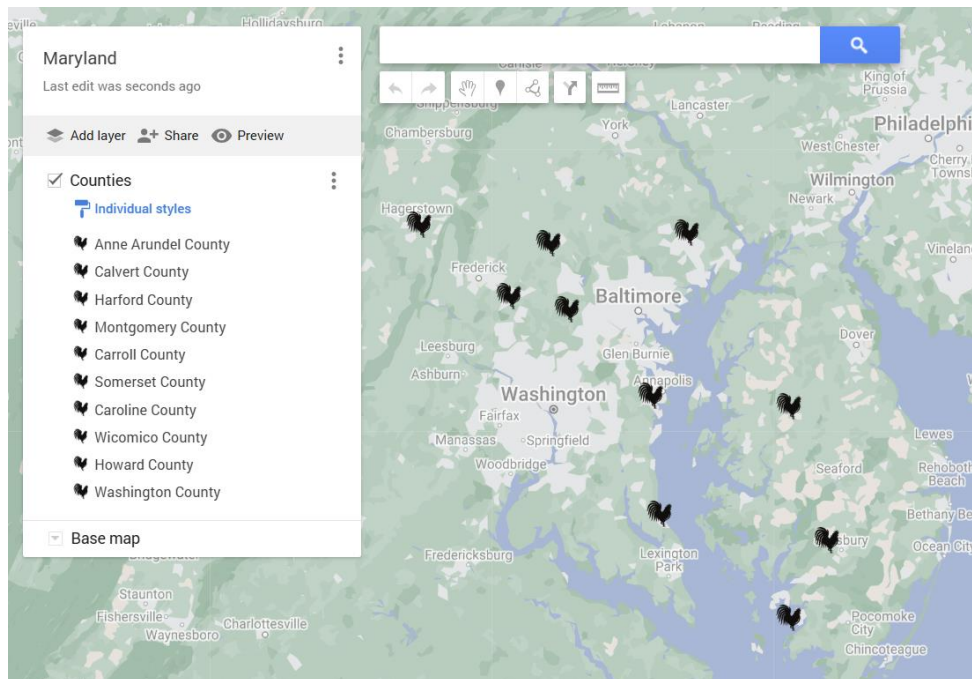
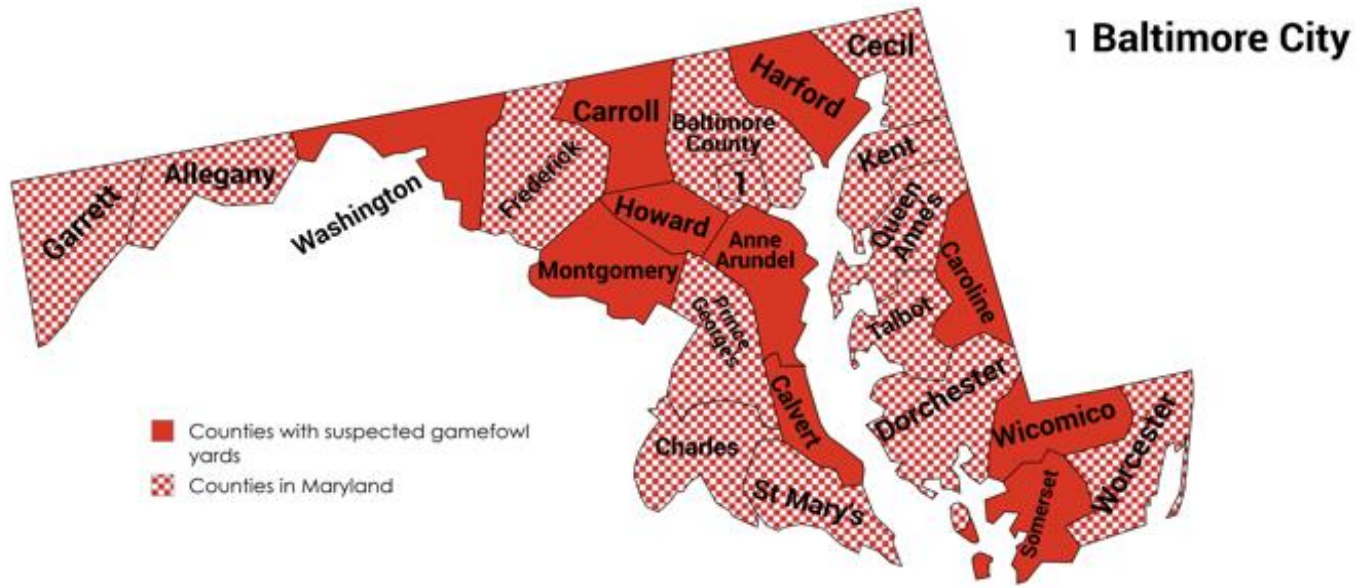


Fig. 1 – Counties with suspected gamefowl yards – Google MyMaps



[Fig. 2 – Counties with suspected gamefowl yards -- mapchart.net](http://mapchart.net)

Two gamefowl yards were identified by satellite imagery and confirmed as the properties where individual arrests occurred. There were also four cockfighting arrests that were found over the past 10 years from four separate counties: Montgomery, Anne Arundel, Harford and Calvert. In addition, nine more suspected gamefowl yards were also found on Facebook, one of which was also confirmed as a seller on Craigslist.

# Anne Arundel County

## [“Man arrested in cockfighting scheme” \(Video\)](#)

June 9, 2015 | ABC WMAR-2 News



[Fig. 4 - News video from WMAR-2 News](#)

### Video Summary Points:

- Arrested man was a tenant on the property.
- Police do not believe cockfighting occurred on the farm, but hundreds of birds were being raised there to be sold for cockfighting.
- Harmon told police he sent some of the birds to the Philippines to fight, according to charging documents.
- The chickens from the Odenton farm tested positive for four highly contagious diseases, including infectious bronchitis.
- The HSUS was on site to assist with the animals.

## [“270 Chickens Seized During Cockfighting Investigation Euthanized”](#)

July 15, 2015 / 10:00 AM EDT / CBS Baltimore

### Article summary points:

- There were 89 cockfighting-related charges; 67 counts of animal cruelty for cockfighting; and 22 charges for possession of cockfighting paraphernalia (cockfighting implement)
- Maryland Department of Agriculture ordered all 270 of those birds destroyed after testing found all had two serious viruses and bacterial infections.
- According to the article, defendant’s Facebook photos show him posing with some of his winnings from cockfighting, and he advocated for its legalization and advertised fighting roosters for sale. However, the Facebook page could not be located.

## [“Odenton man gets 2 years for cockfighting, 6 months for not registering as sex offender”](#)



Article summary points:

- Defendant was on probation for failing to register as a sex offender and received six additional months on top of the two-year sentence for cockfighting crimes.
- He was also ordered to pay \$1,100 to county animal control for restitution.



Police say authorities discovered cockfighting paraphernalia, as well as roosters, hens and chicks living in deplorable conditions.

Fig. 5 – Photo Credit WBALTV

## Calvert County

### [“Huntingtown man faces animal cruelty/cockfighting charges”](#)

MARTY MADDEN [mmadden@somdnews.com](mailto:mmadden@somdnews.com) Sep 4, 2023

Article summary points:

- The alleged cockfight venue location was not disclosed, and the residence/location of the arrest showed no evidence of a gamefowl yard on the property.
- Arrestee did not own the property where he was residing.
- He was charged with nine counts of animal cruelty/cockfighting and one count of possessing a cockfighting implement (a sparring muff).<sup>1</sup>
- Allegedly owned, sold, trained and transported nine roosters “with the intent that the fowl be used in a cockfight.”
- Some of the flock tested positive for laryngotracheitis.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sparring Muff: leather covers that resemble boxing gloves. They are placed over the bird’s spurs during practice fights.

<sup>2</sup> Laryngotracheitis: commonly known as infectious laryngotracheitis virus (ILT), ILTV is an acute, highly contagious herpesvirus infection of chickens, pheasants, peafowl, and, less commonly, turkeys that is characterized by severe dyspnea, coughing, rales, gasping, and expectoration of bloody mucus ([Merck Veterinary Manual](#), 2024)

# Harford County

## “Baltimore County man convicted of running cockfighting ring in Harford County”

by Tim Swift Thu, May 26<sup>th</sup> 2022, 6:14 PM EDT

### Article summary points:

- Harford County sheriff's deputies said the defendant ran a cockfighting operation from the 36-acre property, which was zoned for agricultural use; no other names were listed.
- He was not the owner of his residence or the property where the arrest took place.
- The defendant was charged with and convicted of aggravated animal cruelty, cockfighting, being a cockfight spectator and abuse and neglect of an animal, running cockfighting ring.
- Historical maps of property only go back to February 2022 and show evidence of gamefowl yard.
- This property went into foreclosure and was auctioned in July 2022.
- He was sentenced to six years in prison.

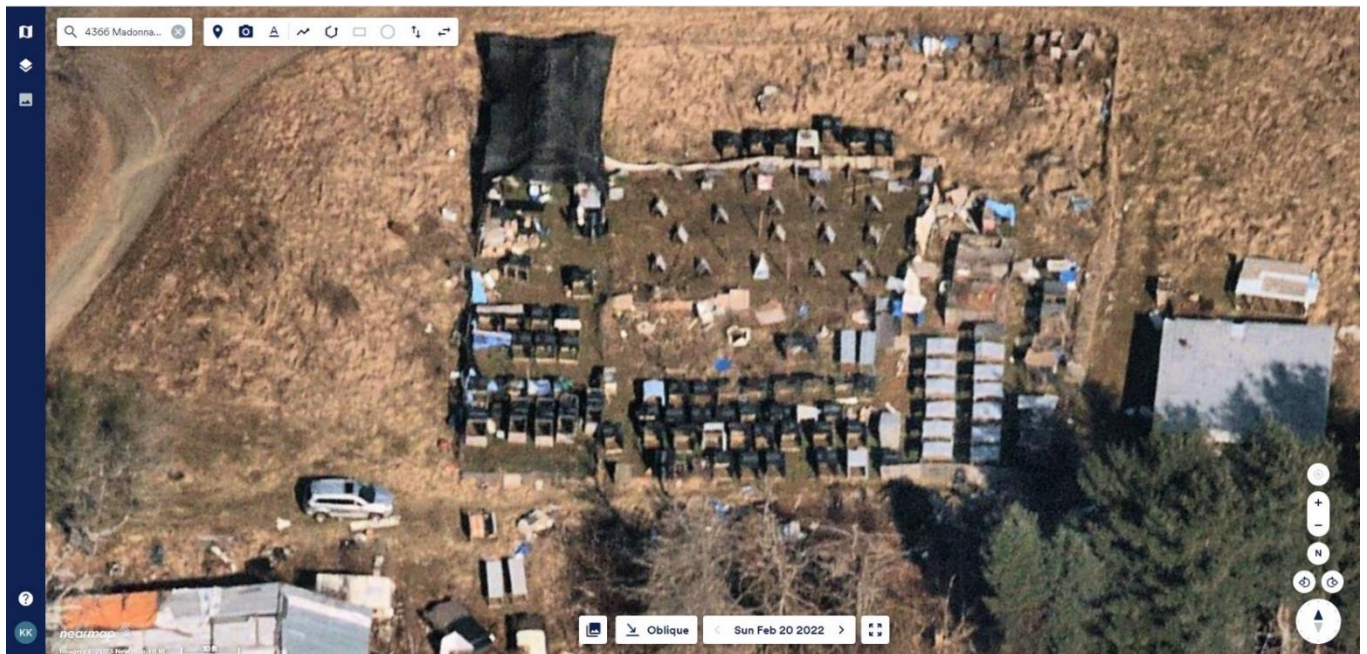


Fig. 7 – Nearmap Satellite Imagery - 4366 Madonna Rd., Street, MD

## “Cockfighting in Harford County Exposed, 1 Charged”

A cockfighting operation in Street was dismantled, according to the Harford County Sheriff's Office.

Elizabeth Janney Patch, Staff

Posted Tue, Oct 5, 2021 at 11:42 am ET|Updated Tue, Oct 5, 2021 at 11:55 am ET

Article summary points:

- Detectives seized 209 fowl from the property, as well as “multiple pieces of evidence indicative of a cockfighting operation,” including “keep cages.” The owner denied conducting cockfights.
- About 50 roosters had been “**dubbed**,”<sup>3</sup> which he admitted doing.
- The HSUS was on hand to assist with the animals.
- He was sentenced to six years in May 2022, subject to three years of probation and an additional 114-year sentence if probation is violated.
- He also had an out-of-county detainer on him, according to the sheriff's office.
- “It is hard to believe this type of animal cruelty could be occurring in our community, but it serves to illustrate that no place is immune from this type of activity,” Harford County Sheriff Jeffrey Gahler said in a statement on the sheriff's office [Facebook page](#) (below).

## Montgomery County

### [Alleged Montgomery County cockfighting ring leads to charges for Silver Spring man](#)<sup>4</sup>

Published December 2, 2019

Updated 11:49PM News FOX 5 DC

Article summary points:

- Warrants were served on three separate properties in Burtonsville.
- Violations were found at the address where the arrest took place.
- Man was charged with 22 counts of aggravated cruelty to animals.
- According to the [Statement of Charges](#), more than 100 roosters and hens were removed from the property, and several roosters had their combs and wattles removed.
- Implements associated with cockfighting were found—a gaff<sup>4</sup> and sparring muffs.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dubbing: to remove the comb and wattle off a fighting cock with scissors, dubbing shears or other cutting tools. This is done to reduce the bird's weight and to reduce chance of injury and bleeding during a fight.

<sup>4</sup> Gaff: Metal extensions fixed on the spurs of the rooster. They may be pointed or sharpened along the edges depending on the cultural tradition of the cockfighters.

<sup>5</sup> Sparring Muff: leather covers that resemble boxing gloves. They are placed over the bird's spurs during practice fights.



Fig. 10 – Photo Credit Montgomery County Animal Services

## “This Md. County — known for its lawyers, lobbyists and scientists — was also home to a breeding operation for cockfighting, police allege”

Published December 4, 2019  
Updated 11:49PM  
By Dan Morse News FOX 5 DC

### Article summary points:

- Officers found “gauffs” inside a tackle box and other items relating to cockfighting.
- When the farm was searched, officers found an area marked off by barrels that looked like a “training/fighting pit.”

### Additional research:

- According to aerial satellite imagery in Fig. 11 below, dated Nov. 5, 2019, two weeks before the arrest, the Burtonsville property showed evidence of a gamefowl yard. While overgrown, the same keep stalls and barrels to the rear are shown in an image capture from October 2023.



Fig. 11 – Nearmap Satellite Imagery

# **SB0375 Testimony.pdf**

Uploaded by: Joy Wilson

Position: FAV

SB0375\_\_Agriculture-Roosters-Restrictions\_\_Favorable\_\_Joy Wilson

I am testifying as a Certified Animal Control Officers for the State of Maryland. The properties that encompass the “business” of cock fighting and the training of said animals is vastly different than those of us that maintain chickens.

These roosters are kept tethered by their legs and/ or in very small cages until they are brought out for a “keep”, which is the training process that they use to prepare a game fowl. They remove their combs and waddles, and sometimes their spurs, keep them in small wooden boxes that do not allow any light in so as to make the bird more aggressive when brought out. They are injected with steroids and antibiotics without ANY oversight of a veterinarian. They have sharp knives tied to their legs where the spur would have been. During a match, these birds normally fight to the death slicing each other open while people cheer and place wagers climbing into the thousands.

Animal Control Officers know when they step onto a property with game fowl as opposed to backyard flocks. Backyard flocks do not maintain a majority of roosters, they do not tether their roosters or remove parts of their bodies.

I am asking for your support on this bill and a favorable outcome.

**SB 375 S.pdf**

Uploaded by: Kevin Cajigas

Position: FAV



# HARFORD COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

## COURAGE HONOR INTEGRITY

**DATE:** 2/21/2025

**TO:** Maryland General Assembly

**FROM:** Kevin Cajigas

Harford County Sheriff's Office

Community Services Division

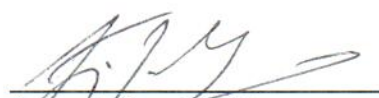
Animal Control Manager

**SUBJECT:** Senate Bill 375

February 21, 2025

Dear Members of the Maryland General Assembly,

I am writing to you in support of Bill 375 for Rooster Restrictions. Back in 2021 Harford County experienced one of the largest cockfighting operations in the state. A total of 209 fowl (majority roosters) were saved from dying for a bloodsport. During our investigation we learned that the current state laws do not limit the ownership of roosters causing this type of crime to go unnoticed. The cockfighting case in our county involved more than just the animal abuse. These investigations often reveal complex criminal networks with ties to child abuse, organized crime, and drug trafficking. These operations jeopardize the safety of our state, and this law would provide a critical tool for us to help keep our communities safe. The passing of this bill will be pivotal for animal control and law enforcement agencies that work investigating these types of crimes and will also make criminals think twice before moving to our wonderful state.

  
Animal Control Manager  
Kevin Cajigas  
2/2021

HCSO 212



# **Agriculture -Roosters - Restrictions- SB 375 .pdf**

Uploaded by: Lisa Radov

Position: FAV



## MARYLAND VOTES FOR ANIMALS

PO Box 10411  
BALTIMORE, MD 21209

February 25, 2025

To: Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
From: Lisa Radov, President and Chair, Maryland Votes for Animals, Inc.  
Re: Agriculture - Roosters – Restrictions – SB 375 - Support

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Lisa Radov. I am the President and Chairman of Maryland Votes for Animals, Inc. We champion humane legislation to improve the lives of animals in Maryland. Speaking for Maryland Votes for Animals, our Board of Directors, and our members across the State of Maryland, I respectfully ask that the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee vote favorably for Agriculture - Roosters – Restrictions – SB 375.

SB 375 protects our communities from the adverse effects of cockfighting and threat of Avian Flu by prohibiting a person who keeps roosters that are maintained individually and kept movement-constrained through use of an enclosure or tether from keeping more than 5 roosters per acre on a single property or more than a total of 25 roosters on a single property.

Cockfighting is illegal in Maryland. Roosters are bred for aggression and placed in a pit to fight each other to the death with razor-sharp knives or other sharp instruments attached to their legs for amusement and gambling. Birds suffer painful deaths while spectators gamble on their fate. Marylanders overwhelmingly reject this cruelty as a sport or entertainment.

Breeding roosters is linked to the spread of Avian Flu, which has recently seen a resurgence in Maryland. Since the first outbreak, more than 2.5 million birds in Maryland commercial flocks have been killed due to Avian Flu and roosters kept in these conditions for cockfighting are a needless risk to the further spread of this devastating disease.

A Maryland rooster law will not affect commercial poultry operations, backyard breeders, members of 4-H or Future Farmers of America. It will protect animals, the poultry industry, and communities by cracking down on those who keep and sell roosters for cockfighting

Let's protect the health and safety of Marylanders by ensuring that cockfighting has no place in our state!

In closing, I would like to thank Senator Kramer for his sponsorship of SB 375 and ask the committee for a favorable report.

## **SB0375 Agriculture roosters restrictions- in favor**

Uploaded by: Patty Crankshaw-Quimby

Position: FAV



**Maryland's Association of Animal Care and Control  
Agencies and Humane Societies**

**PO Box 1143  
Easton, Maryland 21601**

**SB 0375 Agriculture Roosters Restrictions  
Maryland Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee**

**February 21, 2025**

**Dear Honorable Chairman Feldman, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the committee:**

Professional Animal Workers of Maryland, the state organization comprised of animal control agencies and humane societies unanimously supports and encourages a favorable and speedy report on SB 0375 limiting the number of roosters allowed on a certain parcel of land.

While it is illegal, our communities across the state are still encountering the acts of cockfighting and the breeding of animals for this crime. From nuisance complaints of more than 80 roosters in a residential area to the arrest and conviction of those holding more than 100 birds, these cases are not as rare as we may like to think. To be able to limit, track and manage the number of roosters on a property and for what purpose will be an especially valuable tool in the toolbox of humane law enforcement across the state when tackling this issue.

Not only are we concerned about the acts of breeding and fighting these animals, the health concerns for these and other flocks in the area are vitally important. We know that in the past year we have had major outbreaks of avian flu in our state on both sides of the bay. The birds used for cockfighting are not regulated in their uses, rarely vaccinated, and often being transported across states, in turn causing more potential illnesses in our Maryland flocks. We see this bill as a tool in preventing cockfighting at its core—the breeder and protecting other Maryland flocks.

Professional Animal Workers of Maryland believe the passing of SB 0375 is a valuable tool in our work to serve the animals and people of Maryland.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

***Patty Crankshaw-Quimby, CAWA***

Executive Director/Chief Animal Control Officer: Talbot Humane/ Talbot County Animal Control

President: Professional Animal Workers of Maryland

# **SB 375 - MoCo\_Animal Services\_Morningstar\_FAV (GA**

Uploaded by: Sara Morningstar

Position: FAV



# Montgomery County

## Office of Intergovernmental Relations

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**ROCKVILLE: 240-777-6550**

**ANNAPOLIS: 240-777-8270**

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**SB 375**

**DATE: February 25, 2025**

**SPONSOR: Senator Kramer**

**ASSIGNED TO: Education, Energy, and the Environment**

**CONTACT PERSON: Sara Morningstar (sara.morningstar@montgomerycountymd.gov)**

**POSITION: SUPPORT (Office of Animal Services)**

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### **Agriculture – Roosters – Restrictions**

Senate Bill 375 addresses cockfighting in Maryland by prohibiting, with certain exceptions, a person from keeping more than five roosters per acre or more than 25 roosters on a single property beginning January 1, 2026, unless authorized by the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA). Upon conviction, violators could face a penalty of up to \$1,000. The bill provides exceptions for the number of roosters if the owner is a member of 4-H, the Future Farmers of America, a commercial poultry producer, a school, or a government-owned animal shelter. The MDA would be responsible for enforcement and could work in cooperation with local animal control offices or law enforcement. The Montgomery County Office of Animal Services supports Senate Bill 375.

Roosters are protective of their hens, and too many roosters in one area can lead to fighting and harassment of the hens. Accepted animal husbandry practices limit the number of roosters in a flock to reduce the risk of injury to the animals. Individuals involved in cockfighting, however, are intentionally holding more than five roosters per acre and violating legitimate breeding practices. In Montgomery County, the two most recent cases that resulted in convictions for cockfighting were at properties known by the Office of Animal Services to have more than 25 roosters for breeding.

Senate Bill 375 would place a reasonable limit on the number of roosters a person can keep. The bill promotes healthy flock dynamics and is consistent with good animal husbandry practices. The Montgomery County Office of Animal Services urges the Committee to adopt a favorable report.

# **SB375\_FAV\_Humane World for Animals.pdf**

Uploaded by: Stacey Volodin

Position: FAV



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

1255 23<sup>rd</sup> St. NW, Suite 450  
Washington, DC 20037  
202-452-1100  
humaneworld.org

**February 25, 2025**

**Education, Energy, and the Environment 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.





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

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.

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."

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 aspects of cockfighting.

**MDCockfighting -Testimony on SB 375- -TPool.pdf**

Uploaded by: Thomas Pool, MPH, DVM

Position: FAV



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 Thomas Pool, senior veterinarian for Animal Wellness Action. I write in strong support of SB 375. This effort cheaply and surgically inhibits felony cockfighters from their vile trade without inhibiting legitimate poultry operations in any way.

Cockfighting has long been very difficult to control because the tournaments are usually held in secret in rural areas. These are dangerous men often involved in drug and weapons smuggling and human trafficking. The beauty of SB 375 is that it does not require outnumbered law enforcement officers to wade into the heart of an ongoing cockfight. Enforcement can occur before a lot of damage is done, and it does so effectively because those roosters are the economic engine of this criminal enterprise.

I spent 26 years as an Army veterinarian, and as a full colonel I commanded the US Army Veterinary Command. It is a world-wide, tri-service command of more than 2,000 people, and it enabled me to become familiar with the global scourge of cockfighting. I retired and spent another 17 years as the Territorial Veterinarian for Guam, where cockfighting is rampant. There is no redeeming feature of this horrible pastime of sadists, and cockfighting has nothing whatever to do with agriculture.

I saw a brisk, illegal trade of fighting birds to Guam. The federal government and the Guam Department of Agriculture should never have allowed the importation of those fighting birds in contravention of federal law. But I was wondering, why are the states tolerating these massive cockfighting breeding operations in their backyards and tossing the problem to us? SB 375 addresses that problem.

I have been a board-certified specialist in veterinary preventive medicine for more than 30 years, and I have not seen a greater animal threat to human health than the H5N1 avian influenza pandemic. Because of the very intimate contact cockfighter shave with their birds, and because the roosters are kept outside in easy contact with infected wild birds, cockfighters may represent the most likely avenue for the H5N1 flu virus to reassort with human influenza and create the pandemic we have feared for 20 years.

There are a hundred more reasons to take every opportunity to discourage and eliminate cockfighting. SB 375 represents one of the easiest and most focused avenues along that journey. I implore you to support SB 375 for the sake of the voters of Maryland and truly all the people of the entire United States. Thank you for your attention.

*Thomas Pool*

Thomas Pool, MPH, DVM  
Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Preventive Medicine  
Colonel, US Army (ret.)  
Senior Veterinarian, Center for a Humane Economy

Center for a Humane Economy | P.O. Box 30845 | Bethesda, MD 20824  
*Building a humane economy, one company at a time.*

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*Helping animals by promoting legal standards forbidding cruelty.*

# **Maryland Cockfighting -Testimony on SB 375--County**

Uploaded by: Wayne Pacelle

Position: FAV



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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### **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.