

Chairperson and members of the Environment and Transportation committee, I submit this testimony on behalf of The Humane Society Veterinary Medical Alliance (HSVMA), a national association of veterinary professionals with a focus on animal welfare. On behalf of our approximately 9,000 members, I write to express the HSVMA's strong support for HB 513, 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. The birds are typically raised tethered outside and sold to cockfighters for hundreds or thousands of dollars. These operations are detrimental to animal welfare and pose a risk to the Maryland poultry industry.

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.

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 every single state, including Maryland where it has affected nearly 2.5 million commercial and backyard birds. Last month four additional outbreaks of avian flu have been confirmed in Maryland.

Gamefowl may further be a health risk to anyone handling the birds because they are also associated with fungal, viral, and bacterial infections which can be transmitted to humans. Examples include salmonella, campylobacter, and E. coli, which are common in chickens.

The legislation before you 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.

Based on all the arguments laid out in my testimony, we encourage you help Maryland get out of the cockfighting business by voting in favor of HB 513.