

Testimony of Jim Keen in favor of HB 513 by Delegate Allen, before the Maryland House of Delegates Environment and Transportation Committee, February 12, 2025

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 HB 513. 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. HB 513 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 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. HB

513 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, underutilizing 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 HB 513 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.

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