



THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

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On behalf of our members and constituents in Vermont, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) comes in strong support of S. 102, An Act Relating to the Forfeiture of Property Associated with an Animal Fighting Exhibition, sponsored by Senators Sears and Ashe, which would provide law enforcement with vital tools for prosecuting large scale animal fighting rings. I am also here representing the Vermont Humane Federation, which is also in strong support of this measure.

S. 102 prohibits the possession or transportation of animal fighting paraphernalia. Secondly, recognizing that animal fighting rings are highly organized and regularly involve large amounts of money, S. 102 provides for forfeiture of assets which are often gained from illegal animal fighting.

Cockfighters and dogfighters use specialized equipment to train their animals for fighting; stage fights, and increase the bloodletting in the fights. This equipment includes treadmills used for conditioning dogs, specially designed metal knives, or ice-pick like instruments called gaffs, which are tied to the legs of fighting birds, and “breaking sticks” used to pry fighting dogs apart after a fight.

The metal weapons used in cockfights are particularly gruesome. We can all agree that it would be an extreme form of animal cruelty to hammer a nail into the body of a live rooster. Yet the injuries caused in cockfights, when a gaff that is tied to one rooster is thrust into another’s body, are identical to the injuries that would be inflicted in our hammer and nail example.

Vermont has declared attendance at an animal fighting event a felony; however, savvy animal fighters elude law enforcement by exploiting a loophole in Vermont law that does not criminalize possession of animal fighting implements, by carrying or housing animal fighting paraphernalia in one area and fighting animals in another. As law enforcement has a burden to prove that the animals are possessed or transported for the purposes of fighting - generally done through the presence of animal fighting implements alongside the animals - animal fighters have learned to keep animals and implements in separate locations.

S. 102 would allow for the individual transporting key paraphernalia to an animal fight to also face prosecution.

A few of these items may be used for a legal and legitimate purpose like breaking sticks, which are occasionally used by animal control professionals to break up dogfights. Therefore, the language of the bill specifically mandates that these items are only illegal if the paraphernalia is possessed “for the purpose of training or conditioning an animal for participation in animal fighting, or (to) enhance an animal’s fighting

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capability.” Mere possession of these items either with a legitimate purpose or without further evidence of animal fighting is not illegal.

S. 102 also allows for seizure of assets that which would be used to violate our animal fighting statutes. The bill provides for due process and distribution of seized assets.

Animal fighting rings usually involve incredibly large sums of money. Much of this money is raised through other illegal means including narcotics trafficking. A cockfighting case in Kentucky last summer led to the seizure of nearly \$1 million in assets. The fact is that these crimes are not only cruel, they are also highly lucrative for the people that are successful at raising the top of the line fighting animals; primarily dogs or roosters.

That profit incentive has made it hard for law enforcement to eradicate animal fighting despite hundreds of raids and prosecutions. Let’s look at how cockfighting derbies operate for an understanding of why these criminals are so willing to break the law.

At a cockfighting derby, any number of people can bring a predetermined number of birds to participate. Usually these events would be 4 cocks (in which case every individual participating would bring 4 roosters) or a 5 cock (each individual brings 5 roosters.) An entry fee is paid and that goes into the pot that the cockfighters are competing for. Entry fees can range from \$50 to \$1500. Obviously the more entries there are, the more money there is to compete for. Winnings are often in the \$10 to \$15,000 range, sometimes topping out at \$100,000. Just consider that 50 entries with a \$200 entry fee is \$10,000 in the pot. Then consider that these cockfighting pits operate every weekend throughout most of the year. There is huge money to be made and many animal fighters see a fine and probation, or even a short stint in prison, as the cost of doing business.

This is where asset forfeiture comes in. In the Kentucky case the property that housed the fighting pit was seized, as were vehicles that were essentially “company cars”, vehicles that were integral parts of the cockfighting operation. Prosecutors there are demonstrating that there is a cost that comes with participating in these incredibly cruel blood sports and that cost will exceed the potential gain that comes from breaking the law.

In 2015 we have already seen multiple cockfighting raids in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Our region is not free of these sadistic activities.

However, this legislation will go a long way towards preventing Vermont from becoming a refuge for dogfighters or cockfighters. I urge a yes vote on this much needed legislation.

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