

Cockfighting Traffickers Operating in New Mexico Despite Felony Status for Staged Animal Fights and Trafficking

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO, UNITED STATES, August 19, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Though lawmakers outlawed the practice 14 years ago, New Mexico continues to be a major hub for cockfighting, with a network of cockfighters staging fights at pits and trafficking animals for fights across state and national lines, according to a [21-page investigative report](#) released today by Animal Wellness Action (AWA) and the Animal Wellness Foundation (AWF). The report discloses that several individuals in New Mexico have had commercial dealings with Brent and Tyler Easterling, who are both under federal investigation in Alabama by law enforcement agents and prosecutors from the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Agriculture for alleged illegal animal fighting activities.

When New Mexico became the 49th state in the nation to ban cockfighting, it reverberated in a state with dozens of fighting arenas, mostly in the southern portion of the state. That law, signed by Governor Bill Richardson in 2007, led to the shuttering of many of those fighting arenas in the state. Yet some others announced that they'd do business in a different way, including Tommy Booth, operating Tommy's Club at the time and who promised to move their operations over the border to towns in Mexico, including Ojinaga and Palomas. That same year, Congress made animal fighting a federal felony, prohibiting the transport of animals across state or national lines for fighting purposes.

"Even though the federal government and New Mexico made cockfighting a serious criminal offense in 2007, the barbaric practice is widespread in New Mexico today, with fighting pits peppering the state and the trafficking of fighting animals happening on a large scale," said Wayne Pacelle, president of Animal Wellness Action. "Cockfighting is strapping knives or gaffs to animals' legs and placing them in pits to fight to the death."

"Nearly 15 years ago, New Mexico joined 48 other states in outlawing cockfighting," said Patricia Madrid, a former two-term Attorney General from New Mexico (1999 – 2007). "This report reveals disturbing allegations of illegal cockfighting in our state and I urge federal and state authorities to investigate and prosecute individuals violating our laws so that this cruelty is pulled up by the roots."

A major finding of the investigation is some cockfighting enthusiasts based in New Mexico doing business with Brent and Tyler Easterling of Alabama – both of whom have been the subject of a

federal search warrant and federal court order to forbid the movement of animals from their properties.

John Gurule, Jr. (aka "Reck Barberien) and his father, according to evidence AWA and AWF have amassed, are doing business with the Easterlings to grow their gamefarm in or near Albuquerque. The Gurules are receiving birds via the U.S. Postal Service from Tyler Easterling and then, according to own social media posts, breeding, training, and fighting those birds in derbies. On Facebook, the younger Mr. Gurule responded to Swift Creek Farm (owned by Tyler Easterling) expressing appreciation for shipping him fighting animals for a cockfighting derby, stating, "...thank you for putting them in our hands we hope to make you proud."

Gustavo Sierra, of Sierra Brothers Gamefarm in Roswell, also appears to conduct business with Brent Easterling and has shared pictures and videos of cockfighting, upcoming derbies, and their shipment of roosters via the U.S. Postal Service from his farm to other states. He has also advertised his price list for gamefowl.

Mario Maldonado, of APV Gun Club Gamefarm in Albuquerque, also runs a breeding and sales operation. He describes fighting in Mexico and also reports on visits to Gator Gamefarm in Alabama to make selections for future fights.

More granular details about their involvement in alleged illegal activities are provided in our report.

Last month, the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama unsealed a Motion for a Temporary Restraining Orders for Brent, Billy, Tyler, and William Easterling. Authorities searched the property in June and have ordered the Easterlings not to move animals from their property, as they are suspected for use in fights. The United States has identified a possible fighting pit nearby the Easterlings' two gamefowl farms.

The report also identifies other gamefarms in New Mexico where roosters are raised and trained for fighting pits. The offspring of roosters who win major derbies are the ones coveted by other cockfighters, who can win cash prizes and trophies if their birds prevail, such as the World Slasher Cup in the Philippines or one of the numerous major competitions in Mexico. Offspring of birds who win derbies can sell for \$2,000 per bird, with some major fighting operations selling thousands of birds a year. These earnings go unreported to the Internal Revenue Service, given that these transactions constitute contraband.

"Mexico has been a major destination for the export of fighting animals, and that's a federal crime," notes Eric Sakach, a consultant with Animal Wellness Action and a court-certified expert on animal fighting. "The trafficking of animals from New Mexico to Mexico is brisk, and cockfighters there often involve cartels and other organized criminals, with the wide range of illegal activities, including money laundering."

Since 2002, it has been illegal under federal law to transport birds from any state to any other jurisdiction in the U.S. or abroad.

Under federal law, it is a crime to:

- Knowingly sponsoring or exhibiting in an animal fighting venture;
Knowingly attending an animal fighting venture, or knowingly causing an individual who has not attained the age of 16 to attend an animal fighting venture;
- Knowingly buying, selling, possessing, training, transporting, delivering or receiving any animal for the purposes of having the animal participate in an animal fighting venture;
- Knowingly using the mail service of the U.S. Postal Service, or any "written, wire, radio televisions or other form of communications in, or using a facility of, interstate commerce," to advertise an animal for use in an animal fighting venture, or to advertise a knife, gaff, or other sharp instrument designed to be attached to the leg of a bird for use in an animal fighting venture, or to promote or in any other manner further an animal fighting venture except as performed outside the U.S.;
- Knowingly selling, buying, transporting, or delivering in interstate or foreign commerce "a knife, a gaff, or any other sharp instrument" designed or intended to be attached to the leg of a bird for use in an animal fighting venture.

Penalties for each violation of any one of these provisions allow for a maximum of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for perpetrators, except for an adult attending an animal fighting venture. Penalties for adult attendance are one year in prison and a \$5,000 fine. An "animal fighting venture" involves "a fight conducted or to be conducted between at least 2 animals for purposes of sport, wagering, or entertainment, except that the term animal fighting venture shall not be deemed to include any activity the primary purpose of which involves the use of one or more animals in hunting another animal."

Cockfighting under New Mexico law is a misdemeanor offense on a first count.

AWA and AWF maintain a website, www.EndCockfighting.org, which is a comprehensive resource about cockfighting and provides information on the scale of operations in the United States.

Animal Wellness Action (Action) is a Washington, D.C.-based 501(c)(4) organization with a mission of helping animals by promoting legal standards forbidding cruelty. We champion causes that alleviate the suffering of companion animals, farm animals, and wildlife. We advocate for policies to stop dogfighting and cockfighting and other forms of malicious cruelty and to confront factory farming and other systemic forms of animal exploitation. To prevent cruelty, we promote enacting good public policies and we work to enforce those policies. To enact good laws, we must elect good lawmakers, and that's why we remind voters which candidates care about our issues and which ones don't. We believe helping animals helps us all.

The Center for a Humane Economy ("the Center") is a non-profit organization that focuses on influencing the conduct of corporations to forge a humane economic order. The first organization of its kind in the animal protection movement, the Center encourages businesses to honor their social responsibilities in a culture where consumers, investors, and other key stakeholders abhor cruelty and the degradation of the environment and embrace innovation as

a means of eliminating both.

The Animal Wellness Foundation (Foundation) is a Los Angeles-based private charitable organization with a mission of helping animals by making veterinary care available to everyone with a pet, regardless of economic ability. We organize rescue efforts and medical services for dogs and cats in need and help homeless pets find loving caregivers. We are advocates for getting veterinarians to the front lines of the animal welfare movement; promoting responsible pet ownership; and vaccinating animals against infectious diseases such as distemper. We also support policies that prevent animal cruelty and that alleviate suffering. We believe helping animals helps us all.

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