

Animal Wellness Action Says Mass Shooting at Cockfight Outcome of Inattention by Political Leaders and Law Enforcement

Animal welfare group had issued multiple warning about Hawaii being a massive cockfighting hub and one of the top hotspots anywhere in the nation for this crime

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*Wayne Pacelle, president,
Animal Wellness Action*

reacted to the mass shooting at the close of a cockfighting event in Oahu, noting that “it has forecast this very sort of mass shooting at a cockfighting event” because cockfighting is bound up with illegal gambling, money laundering, narcotics trafficking, and human-on-human violence. It is not uncommon for cockfighters to bring children to these events and expose them to this blend of lawless behavior and animal cruelty. Authorities report two dead and three wounded at the back end of a cockfight.

“Hawaii’s state legislature and law enforcement have

proved too timid and failed to address the problem of rampant and organized cockfighting on the islands and the trafficking of fighting birds to and from the state,” said Wayne Pacelle, president of Animal Wellness Action, which runs a comprehensive “End Cockfighting” campaign throughout the United States. “Perhaps now authorities on Hawaii will finally take long overdue action to stop these crimes of violence, protecting people and animals in the process.”

Animal Wellness Action had been preparing for the introduction of national anti-cockfighting legislation tomorrow (April 17th) in Congress to address rampant cockfighting in Hawaii, Oklahoma, Alabama, and several other states where the illegal activity is thriving. The bill, to be led by U.S. Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., and Senator Cory Booker, D-N.J., and titled the Fighting Inhumane Gambling and High-Risk Trafficking (FIGHT) Act, seeks to enhance federal enforcement capacity to deal with states that are not adequately handling the problem.

Hawaii is one of just eight states with misdemeanor penalties for cockfighting, and Animal Wellness Action has repeatedly called for an upgrade of the law, noting that cockfights are entangled with other crimes. Cockfighters strap knives or curved ice picks to the legs of the combatants to enhance the bloodletting.

In 2020, Animal Wellness Action [released an investigative report](#) detailing major traffickers of fighting birds operating from Hawaii at that time. One indicator of that trade has been live exports to the U.S. territory of Guam. AWA's ongoing review of live-animal shipping records to Guam revealed that state-based cockfighters have sent at least 11,648 fighting birds to Guam over the last five years. Hawaii-based cockfighters have shipped 1,742 fighting birds since the records' review commenced – with Hawaii eclipsed only by Oklahoma and California in volume of these live-animal shipments. Hawaii does, however, have 32 exporters – more than any other state.

“Hawaii is not only a global hotspot for illegal fights on the islands, but it is at the center of the cockfighting trade in the Pacific Rim,” said Pacelle. “If Hawaii has 32 individuals exporting fighting birds just to Guam, multiply that number by 10 or 20 and you’ll get the number of Hawaiians breeding tens of thousands of birds for cockfights across the Pacific Rim, including in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Northern Marianas islands. Cockfighting derbies occur every day in Hawaii.”

Animal Wellness Action has rated Hawaii as one of the top five illegal cockfighting states in the nation, along with Oklahoma, Alabama, Kentucky, and California. Four of the five states provide for misdemeanor penalties, rather than felonies, and law enforcement too often look the other way. Misdemeanor penalties are hardly a deterrent when cockfighters can win tens of thousands of dollars at a single cockfighting derby and sell a single fighting bird from a good bloodline for \$2,500. Animal Wellness Action gets a steady stream of complaints from residents concerned about the cruelty and crime associated with cockfighting, including from homeowners' associations and community groups working to stop crime.

Animal Wellness Action has obtained Google Earth images of the shippers' facilities, which displayed the telltale features of cockfighting operations with long rows of roosters tethered to A-frame huts. Laying hens and broiler birds are not tethered or separated like cockfighting roosters.

While Hawaii law provides only misdemeanor penalties, the federal law against animal fighting is strong. Under Section 26 of the Animal Welfare Act, 7 U.S.C. 2156, it is a crime to:

- Knowingly sponsor or exhibit in an animal fighting venture;
- Knowingly attend an animal fighting venture, or knowingly causing an individual who has not attained the age of 16 to attend an animal fighting venture;
- Knowingly buy, sell, possess, train, transport, deliver, or receive any animal for purposes of having the animal participate in an animal fighting venture;
- Knowingly use 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 sell, buy, transport, or deliver 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 allows for a maximum of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for perpetrators, except for an adult attending an animal fighting venture.

The FIGHT Act, amending Section 26 of the Animal Welfare Act and to be introduced as soon as tomorrow, would enhance the enforcement opportunities under the law by banning simulcasting and gambling on animal fights; halting the shipment of mature roosters (chickens only) shipped through the U.S. mail; creating a citizen suit provision, after proper notice to federal authorities, to allow private right of action against illegal animal fighters and ease the resource burden on federal agencies; and enhancing forfeiture provisions to include real property for animal fighting crimes.

The Congress has strengthened the law against animal fighting five times, with the Animal Fighting Prohibitions Enforcement Act enacted in 2007 and through Farm bill amendments in 2002, 2008, 2014, and 2018. Animal Wellness Action’s two agriculture veterinarians issued a [new research paper](#) on cockfighting and avian influenza and other infectious diseases.

Animal Wellness Action is a Washington, D.C.-based 501(c)(4) whose mission is to help animals by promoting laws and regulations at federal, state and local levels that forbid cruelty to all animals. The group also works to enforce existing anti-cruelty and wildlife protection laws. Animal Wellness Action believes helping animals helps us all.

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