

Oklahoma's bird flu outbreaks happen in 'cockfighting capital of the world,' unsurprisingly, animal welfare groups say

Cockfighting is a known super-spreader of avian diseases, threatening human health and state's poultry industry

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES,
November 9, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/
-- STATEMENT FOR PRESS



Cockfighting Match

Oklahoma Cockfighters Plotting to Defy the State Law with Onset of New Cockfighting Season This Month Even as Deadly Avian Influenza Spreads in the State

Cockfighting is a known super-spreader of avian diseases, threatening human health and state's poultry industry

Cockfighters are set to start the new cockfighting season around Thanksgiving, according to intelligence gathered by Animal Wellness Action, and that illegal criminal activity coincides with the spread of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) throughout the United States, including in Oklahoma. Beyond the cruelty and crime associated with cockfighting, the activity threatens to spread the deadly diseases far and wide and threatens the state's commercial poultry industry and human health. The cockfighters have an "annual legislative meeting" on Nov. 12 in McAlester and sponsors are promising that known-

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Jim Keen, D.V.M. director of veterinary sciences for CHE

cockfighter and boxing champion Roy Jones, Jr. will be at the event.

Oklahoma has reported four recent bird flu outbreaks in backyard poultry flocks. Dr. Thomas

Pool, an Oklahoman and senior veterinarian with Animal Wellness Action, has documented the widespread movement of fighting birds raised in Oklahoma and sent as far off as Guam and the Philippines. Animal Wellness Action and its partner groups have labeled Oklahoma "the cockfighting capital of the United States" and, with Showing Animals Respect and Kindness (SHARK), have identified dozens of major fighting pits and gamecock farms in the state, with many of them concentrated in the southeast. Some state lawmakers from this region unsuccessfully worked in the Legislature earlier this year to promote legislation to decriminalize cockfighting. The cockfighters are gathering in McAlester to raise more money to resume their pro-cockfighting campaign in Oklahoma City.

The cockfighters' front group, the Oklahoma Gamefowl Commission, even saw one of its leaders arrested for illegal cockfighting earlier this year, but the group has continued to discuss plans for the upcoming fighting season and to supply illegal pits inside and outside the U.S. with fighting birds.

"Make no mistake, the Oklahoma Gamefowl Commission is a front group for cockfighters and its leaders are neck deep in this criminal enterprise," said Wayne Pacelle, president of Animal Wellness Action. "No one at the State Capitol should be under any illusion but that a criminal syndicate is at work to clear a legislative path so these lawbreakers can stage acts of cruelty to animals without legal consequences for them as participants."

During the 2023 legislative session, Animal Wellness Action and Showing Animals Respect and Kindness (SHARK) had released information detailing that the people behind the Commission led an organized cockfighting network in the state. The animal-welfare groups documented that claim by providing footage of the gamecock farms of the Commission leaders, including videos touting their marketing efforts and participation at cockfighting derbies, as well as evidence of shipments of gamecocks through the U.S. mail, gamecock price lists, and more.

In total since early 2022, [61.26 million birds](#) have been affected by HPAI, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and it's already the most expensive animal disease outbreak in U.S. history, costing billions of dollars to (so far unsuccessfully) extirpate the virus while inflating consumer prices for eggs and poultry. Within the last five weeks, the USDA's Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service reported more than 54 commercial and backyard flocks have been infected by H5N1 (Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza) nationwide, resulting in the depopulation of 2.5 million birds in October and November. APHIS won't say how many of these 23 backyard flocks are gamecock operations, but cockfighting flocks are almost certainly part of the matrix of infected populations.

Our report, entitled "Cockfighting: Playing chicken & gambling with potentially pandemic Avian influenza & virulent Newcastle Disease," by Jim Keen, DVM, Ph.D., and Tom Pool, DVM, MPH, reveals that cockfighting poses a major threat of disease spread.

"These outbreaks are occurring in the heart of the illegal American cockfighting industry," said

James Keen, D.V.M., Ph.D., and the author of a landmark [report on cockfighting](#) and the spread of zoonotic diseases. “We know that widespread movement of fighting birds can spread Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza throughout the western hemisphere and into Asia given the documented sales and transfers of these fighting birds.”

Cockfighting yields risk disease vectors and reservoirs because fighting birds are reared outdoors under poor biosecurity and widely sold, traded, and deliberately commingled with other birds at fighting derbies under stressful conditions. Cockfighters engage in particularly risky handling practices, stirring them to fight after they are injured in the pits, even exchanging bodily fluids with the birds. Avian Influenza (AI) and virulent Newcastle Disease (vND) can infect commercially raised poultry, while AI can mutate and threaten human health.

“This HPAI outbreak is a wake-up call for lawmakers and law enforcement about the threats posed by an out-of-control Oklahoma cockfighting industry,” said Wayne Pacelle, president of Animal Wellness Action and the Center for a Humane Economy. “The entire poultry industry should join us in fending off the efforts to repeal Oklahoma’s strong anti-cockfighting law and they should stand by our side in promoting the FIGHT Act in Congress to allow a stronger crackdown on illegal cockfighting operations.”

Both the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate have issued the Fighting Inhumane Gambling and High-Risk Trafficking (FIGHT) Act, and the authors hope to include the provision as an amendment to the pending Farm bill. Both pieces of legislation were driven by concerns for the barbarism of animal fighting, other criminal behavior commingled with it, and disease threats to poultry posed by transporting fighting roosters.

The FIGHT Act, amending Section 26 of the Animal Welfare Act, would enhance the enforcement opportunities by banning simulcasting and gambling of animal fighting ventures; halting the shipment of mature roosters (chickens only) shipped through the U.S. mail (it is already illegal to ship dogs through the mail), creating a citizen suit provision after proper notice to federal authorities to allow private right of action against illegal animal fighters, and enhancing forfeiture provisions to include real property for animal fighting crimes.

ABOUT

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. X: @AWAction_News

The Center for a Humane Economy is a Washington, D.C.-based 501(c)(3) whose mission is to help animals by helping forge a more 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 Center believes helping animals helps us all. X: @TheHumaneCenter

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