

Fact Sheet

Support H.R. 2492 to Crack Down on Spectators at Animal Fights

In 2007, Congress upgraded the federal law against animal fighting, making interstate transport of fighting animals or cockfighting implements a federal felony. In 2008, in the wake of the Michael Vick dogfighting case, Congress upgraded the law again, making possession and training of fighting animals a felony and enhancing the upper limits on jail time for perpetrators. But there is a remaining gap in the law that should be corrected to allow for a more comprehensive crackdown on this barbaric activity.

It's time to close that gap and make it a crime to knowingly attend an animal fighting venture, just as the law now covers offenses such as exhibiting, buying, possessing, training, and transporting an animal for participation in an animal fighting venture. Reps. Tom Marino and Betty Sutton have introduced H.R. 2492 to prohibit knowing attendance at an animal fighting event and bringing a minor to such an event. The bill authorizes misdemeanor penalties of up to one year in prison and fines for knowing spectators and felony penalties of up to three years in prison and fines for causing a minor to attend.

Spectators are crucial to animal fighting. Spectators are more than mere observers at animal fights. They are participants and accomplices that enable the crime, provide a large share of the funding for the criminal enterprise, and help conceal handlers and organizers who try to blend into the crowd when a bust occurs. Spectators pay hundreds or thousands of dollars in admission fees and gambling bets, generating the bulk of the revenue for this illegal enterprise. The fights would not occur without the crowd betting on the outcome and enjoying the bloodletting.

Spectators provide cover for animal fighters, who weave into crowds to evade prosecution at the first sign of a police raid. Further, spectators are themselves often participants in animal fights, waiting their turn as the current group of handlers pits their animals. In a typical organized animal fight, there are several rounds during an event or derby. When police raid an animal fight, it is extremely difficult to differentiate between spectators and participants who were going to fight their dog or bird in the next match. Those who finance this animal cruelty and make it profitable, including those who are waiting their turn to fight, must also be subject to federal law and meaningful penalties.



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This legislation will not affect innocent bystanders. The bill requires prosecutors to prove that someone has knowingly attended an animal fighting venture. It does not reach to individuals who are not aware they are present at an animal fight or situations where two animals fight without provocation by animal fighting organizers. Because organized animal fighting is a federal crime and illegal in all 50 states, this activity is highly clandestine. Spectators at animal fights don't just accidentally happen upon a fight – they seek out the criminal activity at secret locations, often need passwords to enter, and pay hefty admission fees for the opportunity to watch and gamble on the gruesome show – facts that a prosecutor might use as evidence to prove that a defendant knowingly attended.

This legislation is consistent with state laws. It is illegal in 49 states to be a knowing spectator at an animal fight (49 cover dogfighting, 43 cover cockfighting). A majority of states – now 28 (with others currently pending in their state legislatures) – impose felony-level penalties on spectators. This bill will better align federal law with the states, now that nearly all states ban attendance at animal fights and a majority of states have felony spectator provisions.

Congress should do all it can to end the scourge of animal fighting. Animal fighting is an inhumane and cruel activity involving the deliberate pitting of animals against each other to fight, often for lengthy contests that end in death, for the sole purpose of gambling and entertainment. Animals used for fighting are often drugged to heighten their aggression and forced to keep fighting even after they've suffered grievous injuries such as broken bones, deep gashes, punctured lungs, and pierced eyes. Young children are often brought to these events and exposed to the gruesome spectacle as acceptable entertainment.

Dogs bred and trained to be vicious may endanger public safety – in some cases where a dog has mauled a child or neighbor, the dog also exhibits signs of being trained and used for fighting. Some dogfighters steal pets to use as bait for training their dogs. Cockfighting has been linked to the death of a number of people in Asia from bird flu and to an outbreak of a poultry disease that cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$200 million to contain.

Animal fighting is associated with other criminal activities such as gangs, gambling, narcotics, weapons possession, public corruption, and various violent crimes. A three-year study by the Chicago Police Department found that 70% of animal offenders had also been arrested for other felonies, including domestic and aggravated battery, illegal drug trafficking, and sex crimes. Study after study shows the direct link between animal abuse crimes and human abuse.