



State needs felony law to help end animal fighting

By Rep. Murrell Smith
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Two years ago I supported legislation to put an end to animal fighting and cockfighting in South Carolina. Frankly, I expected it to be an issue that would sail through the South Carolina Legislature. How on earth could anyone be in favor of animal fighting, one of the cruelest practices known to man?

The animal and cockfighting advocates rallied, however, even hiring a contract lobbyist in the hope of protecting their criminal industry from much needed reform.

In more than 100 years, nothing has substantially changed in South Carolina's animal fighting laws, which basically allowed the perpetrators of this violent enterprise to continue fighting animals with a \$100 ticket being the only price they would ever have to pay.

Fortunately, the animal fighters failed. Working closely with Attorney General Henry McMaster, the Humane Society of the United States, the Palmetto Agribusiness Council, the Palmetto Family Council, the S.C. Association of Veterinarians and the S.C. Poultry Federation, we made significant changes to our state's animal fighting laws.

The results increased penalties on cockfighters, made hog/dog fighting a felony and added much needed seizure and forfeiture provisions to the code. Our efforts have given law enforcement the tools it needs to take this barbarism out of criminals' hands.

We are not finished, however. This year, I am sponsoring legislation that would make cockfighting a felony. This will bring South Carolina's animal fighting laws in line with two-thirds of the country, as well as with the federal government, which has passed laws making animal fighting material trafficking and transportation a felony.

The few remaining states where animal fighting and cockfighting are not yet treated as felony charges are working to eliminate these practices in their own legislatures. Given what is happening in other states, my concern is that if we fail to act now, our state could become the proverbial dumping ground for this practice, to say nothing of the criminal element associated with it.

Opponents to our reforms have little argument to offer other than to say that this practice is rich in history and harms no one.

I suppose you might be able to argue in favor of the history, but I could not disagree more about the harm that animal fighting brings to our state.

Evidence shows that these fights rarely occur in a vacuum. When law enforcement has raided animal

fighting pits, children are routinely present and other illegal activity is frequently occurring, including drug dealing, firearms trading and gambling. Every one of these crimes has a detrimental effect on our society and our children, even if you believe that watching two animals tear at each other until one is dead or bleeding to death isn't detrimental in its own right. Cockfighting is also a human health issue. It has been linked to the outbreak of avian bird flu in Asia and to the deaths of two children there. Containing and ultimately eliminating "bird flu" is of grave concern to health officials, veterinarians and the legitimate poultry industry, which is why these groups are among the strongest supporters of outlawing this practice as most of the birds killed in these savage fights are transported illegally. In fact, concern about the spread of avian flu is so great that officials in Puerto Rico just banned the import of all birds into the territory following an outbreak in the Dominican Republic.

Here at home, the Michael Vick situation has obviously brought the issue of animal fighting into the national headlines, shedding new light on two important reasons why this bill needs to pass quickly. First, this case shows how widespread the animal fighting epidemic really is if someone of Vick's celebrity was involved. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of our society would never take part in animal fighting and finds its very existence barbaric, the sad reality is that it actually occurs much more often than we'd like to think.

Second, as the facts bore out after the initial raid on Vick's Virginia home, drug dealers, violent offenders and gamblers were all identified as part of the regular scene at these fights. As a state, we have never tolerated this behavior in any other setting, so why should an exception be made here when it comes to animal and cockfighting?

But even if it weren't for the attention the Vick case brought to animal fighting, the simple truth is that there is no redeeming value to animal fighting or cockfighting in this day and age, and the time has come to finally rid South Carolina of these inhumane practices and the crimes that surround them. I look forward to working this session to make sure it happens.

Murrell Smith, a Republican, represents District 67, Sumter and Clarendon counties, in the South Carolina House of Representatives. He is an attorney in Sumter.

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