

August 21, 2023

Dear Chairman Townsend, Vice Chair Micari, and other members of the Tulare County Board of Supervisors.

My name is Jim Keen. I am an agricultural veterinarian with a Ph.D. in infectious disease epidemiology. I have worked as a food animal clinician, a veterinary infectious disease researcher at the USDA's Meat Animal Research Center in Nebraska for two decades, and as faculty at the University of Nebraska School of Veterinary Medicine for 13 years.

I am currently Director of Veterinary Science for Animal Wellness Action and the Center for a Humane Economy, two animal protection non-profits. I currently live on my family's 140-year-old grain and livestock farm in eastern South Dakota. In the 2000s I also did dairy veterinary Salmonella control work on several large operations in Tulare County, so I completely understand the importance of agriculture to your County.

I am writing to urge your Board to adopt and enforce a strong ordinance to restrict private ownership of large numbers of roosters to help control the plague of illegal cockfighting. A proper ordinance would exempt legitimate poultry operations that need more roosters. But as you well know, cockfighting operations are not legitimate poultry operations.

In my 35-year-long veterinary career, I have had a great deal of disease outbreak experience as a field veterinarian, including Foot and Mouth Disease in the United Kingdom in 2001, the Southern California virulent Newcastle Disease poultry outbreak in 2003, and the African Swine fever epidemic in central Asia between 2007 and 2014.

Virulent Newcastle disease (vND), along with avian influenza (Bird flu) are the two worst avian diseases on the planet. The US is normally free of vND but California has seen several introductions of the virus from our Southern border. For six weeks in Spring 2003, I worked with a large team based out of Orange County to try and control the enormous vND outbreak in Southern California. I primarily worked in South Central Los Angeles and peri-urban LA county where there were many small-scale agricultural operations and rancheros. Many of these small farms raised fighting cocks. It was easy to identify cockfighting farms by the large number of roosters of cockfighting breeds and the caging arrangement of one rooster with two hens for breeding ("trios"). Some of the operations I came across held up to a few hundred birds.

It is well documented that the 2002-2003 vND outbreak started from smuggled cockfighting birds from Mexico. The vND virus is endemic in Mexico, and virus fingerprinting, as well as epidemiologic investigations, pinpointed the outbreak to illegal cockfighting. *Cockfighting was also a major means of virus spread, as many persons involved in cockfighting activity also worked in commercial poultry operations.*

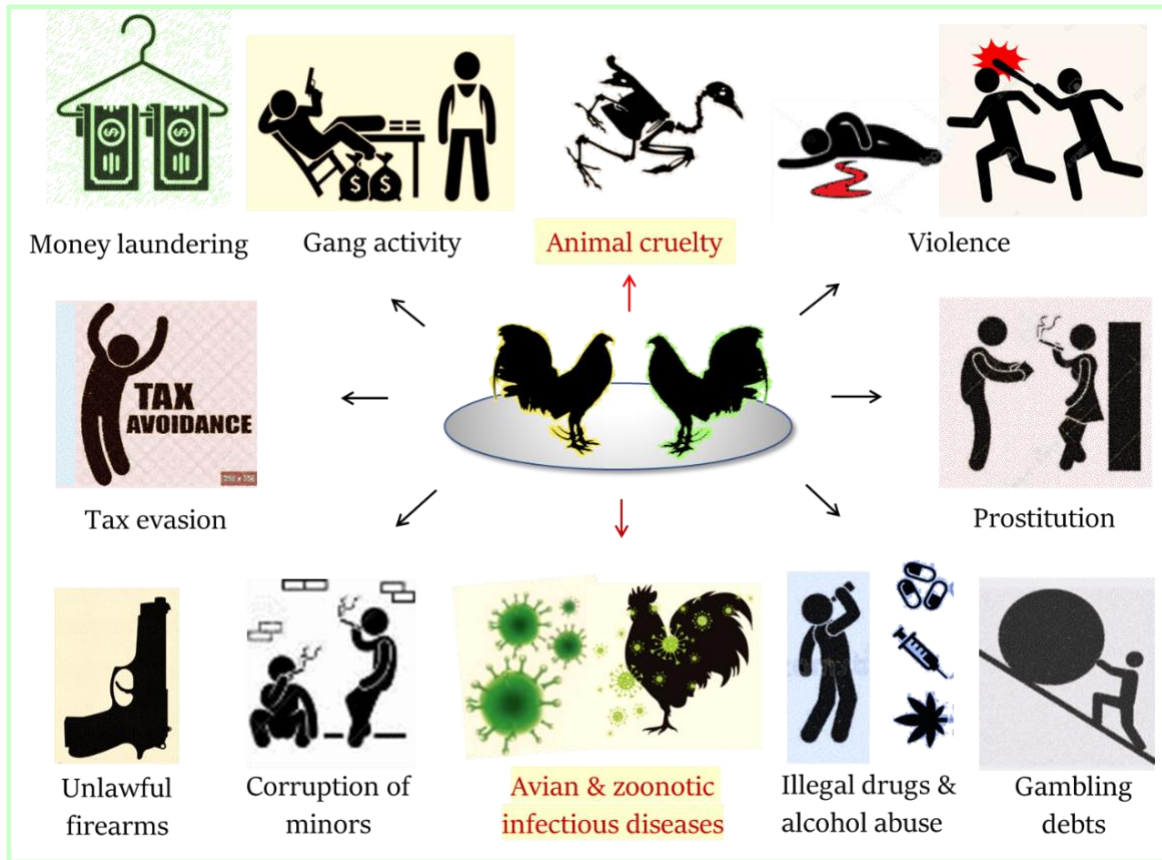
Cockfighters received large reimbursements for their fighting birds that were euthanized as part of the vND control efforts. This was done to help prevent the cockfighters from going even further underground and spreading the virus even more.

Of even greater concern than vND is the ongoing highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza H5N1 virus. This bird flu virus has killed almost 60 million US poultry in the past 1.5 years. This virus is also zoonotic (spreads from infected bird to people), and a simple mutation could make it spread rapidly and infect/kill people. Unfortunately, [the USDA does not report cockfighting operations among the 514 “backyard flocks” so far infected with H5N1 bird flu](#), but I am certain many are illegal cockfighting farms.

In closing, for the health and welfare of the people and poultry in your community, please adopt and enforce a strict ordinance to restrict rooster ownership in Tulare County. Cockfighting is a brutal blood sport with no place in our civilized society. I also invite you to review a [detailed report on the role of cockfighting as a vector of virulent Newcastle disease and bird flu H5N1](#) that I co-wrote with my veterinary colleague Dr. Tom Pool.

Thank you.

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Cockfighting is both a serious crime and a disease threat. Human cruelty to animals is the root of cockfighting but several other harmful socio-pathological sequelae follow from this blood sport including very serious avian and zoonotic infectious disease risks (vND and bird fu H5N1) arise from cockfighting.