



***On a mission to bring ethical food to the table***

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June 23, 2023

Dear Senator:

On behalf of Vital Farms, Inc., one of two publicly traded egg production companies in the United States, we write to alert you to our endorsement of the Fighting Inhumane Gambling and High-Risk Trafficking (FIGHT) Act, S.1529. We hope you will cosponsor the bill and include it as a provision of the committee-formulated Farm bill in 2023.

Vital Farms is deeply concerned about animal welfare. This is especially so because animal care is at the center of our business model. All 300+ farmers in our farm network, located across Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee, Ohio, and Kentucky, meet rigorous and carefully formulated standards for humane treatment. We are also deeply concerned about the spread of avian influenza and other zoonotic diseases that afflict birds and the role that we understand cockfighting plays in their spread.

Gamefowl are high-risk disease vectors and reservoirs because they are widely sold and traded, deliberately mixed under stressful conditions at fighting derbies, reared under poor biosecurity, and employ husbandry or fighting practices that spread disease.

It is documented that cockfighting drives outbreaks of serious poultry and zoonotic diseases especially virulent Newcastle disease (vND) and highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI, “bird flu”) viruses.<sup>1</sup> These are certainly the two most consequential diseases of poultry in the United States and across the globe.

- HPAI and vND spread widely and quickly and can kill virtually any species of wild birds and all poultry. When outbreaks occur – and they are not endemic to the U.S. -- these

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Keen, Jim DVM, PhD, and Tom Pool DVM, MPH. 2022. *Cockfighting: Playing Chicken & Gambling with Potentially Pandemic Avian Influenza & Virulent Newcastle Disease*. <https://endcockfighting.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Cockfighting-HPAI-vND-Report-12.30.22.pdf>.

viruses are controlled by lethal depopulation, sometimes resulting in the killing of millions of birds.

- Ten of the 15 US vND outbreaks originated from illegally smuggled game fowl for cockfighting causing major disease epidemics in southern California in 2002-03 and 2018-20. At least 16 million birds died and more than \$1 billion was spent to control US vND outbreaks.
- In the 2014-2015 U.S. HPAI H5 epidemic, 50.4 million commercial layers, and turkeys died or were euthanized in 21 states causing economic losses of \$3.3 billion.

The ongoing U.S. Dec 2021-present bird flu epidemic has killed **58.65 million poultry (as of April 17, 2023) in 323 commercial flocks and 502 backyard flocks**, and countless wildfowl in all states except Hawaii. This will be 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.

While we are concerned about the effects on our farmers – and we are undertaking an array of biosecurity to prevent the infection among our flocks, we want to note that HPAI is even more menacing than vND because **the bird flu virus easily mutates and can infect and kill people.**

A bird flu outbreak launched or sustained by cockfighting could lead to a zoonotic avian influenza plague more harmful than the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cockfighting is a disgraceful, archaic, and inhumane activity, and the United States should aggressively work to eliminate gamecock flocks and fighting derbies. Both are a menace to commercial agriculture that involves laying hens or broiler birds.

I hope you will take note of Vital Farms' endorsement of S. 1529 and act with urgency to enact the measure.

Sincerely,



Matthew O'Hayer  
Executive Chairman  
Vital Farms, Inc.