

## Enhancing Enforcement of Federal Anti-Cruelty Laws

*Congress should act on the ACE Act and the FBI Animal Cruelty Taskforce Act*

**The Problem:** A lack of enforcement of our federal anti-cruelty statutes is not just a problem for animals, but also the safety of our communities. A growing **body of research** demonstrates a strong correlation between animal cruelty and other forms of violent and antisocial behavior. In domestic settings, animal cruelty often co-occurs with spousal abuse, child maltreatment, and elder abuse, while children who witness or engage in violence against animals are three times more likely to commit violence against humans. Moreover, cockfighting is known to spread avian disease, costing taxpayers and consumers billions as a consequence of disease spread to commercial poultry flocks.



The statistics showing the link between animal and human violence are alarming. A Chicago Police Department study found that 70% of those arrested for animal cruelty had prior felony arrests, and 59% were gang members. People involved in dogfighting and cockfighting are also typically involved in illegal gambling, money laundering, illegal firearms possession, murder, and other violent crimes.

Recognizing these linkages to crime and other antisocial behavior, Congress has taken very intentional action to make animal cruelty a federal crime, offering the prospect of collaborating with local law enforcement to root out these practices, make our communities safer, and protect agriculture. The Congress passed, and President Trump signed, the Preventing Animal Cruelty and Torture (18 U.S.C. § 48) Act and also the Parity in Animal Cruelty Enforcement (7 U.S.C. § 2156) Act, which prohibits dogfighting and cockfighting everywhere in the United States, including the territories. There are also longer-standing laws that also require rigorous enforcement, such as the Horse Protection Act (15 U.S.C. § 1821), which takes aim at the inhumane practice of horse “soring”; the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (7 U.S.C. § 1902) to require that mammals slaughtered for food be rendered “insensible to pain” before being killed; and the civil and criminal features of the Animal Welfare Act (7 U.S.C. §§ 2132 – 2149).

Yet the federal government’s active enforcement of these laws has been very limited and not commensurate with the scale of the problems. U.S. Attorneys are taking more animal cruelty cases and there’s been more interest on the policing side from the FBI, Homeland Security Investigations, Customs and Border Protection, and the USDA’s OIG. Since the Environment and Natural Resources Division (ENRD) took over responsibility for enforcement of five key national anti-cruelty laws more than a decade ago, there has been more casework on dogfighting. But the agency has prosecuted just three anti-cockfighting cases (an average

of a single case every four years), zero cases under the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act or the Horse Protection Act, and only one criminal case under the Animal Welfare Act unrelated to animal fighting.

Since Congress extended the federal animal fighting ban to the U.S. territories in 2018, in a measure signed by President Trump, there has not been a single enforcement action in Puerto Rico, Guam, or the Northern Marianas, even though these jurisdictions remain hotbeds of illegal animal fighting. Animal Wellness Action and the Center for a Humane Economy have referred more than 200 cases involving trafficking networks and illegal fighting operations—including evidence of tens of thousands of fighting birds shipped to Mexico, the Philippines, and Guam—yet the criminal conduct documented has gone unexamined and unenforced. Without strategic action to dismantle them, sophisticated criminal operators act with impunity, threatened only by local law enforcement operations that often do not have the ability to chase down operations with interstate and international reach.

The main reason for this lackluster record of enforcement is a lack of dedicated resources. Animal cruelty prosecutions are subordinated within a law enforcement section charged with other programmatic responsibilities and their own brimming docket of cases. The Environmental Crimes section has just one nearly full-time prosecutor charged with handling animal cruelty cases, in a nation with tens of thousands of dogfighters and, according to the USDA, as many as 24 million fighting birds. The FBI has classified animal cruelty as a “Group A” offense for reporting purposes, but its work would be enhanced with dedicated personnel at the agency’s headquarters. Without dedicated personnel, investigations and prosecutions are typically serendipitous and simply not occurring on the scale sufficient to root out these malicious and widespread forms of animal cruelty.

**The Solutions:** The **Animal Cruelty Enforcement (ACE) Act** and the **FBI Animal Cruelty Taskforce (FBI ACT) Act** provide complementary capacity to execute an enforcement strategy to combat animal cruelty. The ACE Act establishes a dedicated Animal Cruelty section at the Department of Justice to prosecute complex cruelty cases, while the FBI Animal Cruelty Taskforce Act equips the nation’s premier policing agency to investigate these crimes and dismantle criminal networks that intersect with a variety of other offenses, including human trafficking, narcotics trafficking, weapons trafficking, money laundering, and illegal gambling.

### **Organized Crime, Public Safety, and National Security**

Dogfighting remains rampant, and it’s always tied to other dangerous criminal conduct. In September 2023, a U.S. Attorney in Indiana led a federal law enforcement effort resulting in **21 arrests** for dogfighting and narcotics trafficking, in an operation moving dogs and drugs from Indiana to Mississippi to Mexico. There was a **double homicide** at a dogfight in Mississippi in Nember, but that case remains unsolved by local authorities.

U.S.-based cockfighters are business partners with cartels and other organized crime associations that run and control major animal-fighting venues in Mexico and the Philippines, with animal-fighting violence occurring in those

countries and in the United States. There may be as many as a million fighting birds trafficked from the U.S. to Mexico, with the birds also moving north into our country from Mexico.

- In November 2024, cockfighting enthusiast and son-in-law of **cartel leader “El Mencho”** was **arrested** in Riverside County.
- In April 2025, there were 12 people murdered at a cockfight in Ecuador, where “President Daniel Noboa has said that about 70% of the world's cocaine now flows through Ecuador's ports before being shipped to the US and Europe,” as **reported by the BBC**.
- In late January 2024, there were 14 wounded and six murdered, including a 16-year-old **from eastern Washington** at a cockfighting

derby in the Mexican state of Guerrero. Months before, also in Mexico, 20 people were **massacred** at a cockfighting derby, including a Chicago woman.

- In December 2024, there were four murdered at a Mexican cockfighting arena, including “El Chabelo,” a **leader of the Sinaloa Cartel**.

U.S. cockfighters are intimately connected to the organized crime networks that control cockfighting in the Philippines, with tens of thousands of U.S.-reared birds shipped to the Asian nation. In 2025, it’s been reported that perhaps 400 people have been **murdered in disputes over the activity**, including over debts from **rampant online gambling** (known as “e-sabong”). In the Philippines in 2022, there was an estimated **\$13 billion** wagered on online cockfights. According to the Cybercrime Investigation and Coordinating Center, “a total of 52,847 domains and sub-domains linked to e-sabong or online cockfighting have been taken down since 2023,” as **reported in the Philippine Star**.

### ***Zoonotic Disease and Economic Consequences***

Illegal trafficking of fighting birds has repeatedly triggered outbreaks of virulent Newcastle disease and Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (H5N1), two highly contagious zoonotic diseases that threaten animal and human health. Of the 15 most recent Newcastle outbreaks, 10 were directly tied to smuggled fighting birds from Mexico. These outbreaks have forced the mass depopulation of millions of commercial poultry and cost taxpayers **more than \$1 billion in containment and indemnification**. The recent epidemic of H5N1, almost certainly spread in part by illegal cockfighting, has had an enormous effect on avian welfare. There have been 135 million laying hens depopulated, with farmers indemnified at the level of \$2 billion by taxpayers. Taxpayers also felt the effects of the zoonotic disease crisis at the cash register, with

\$20 billion in additional costs because of soaring egg prices after the supply was constricted. By enforcing existing laws against animal trafficking and fighting, the ACE Act and FBI ACT Act would help prevent future supply shocks, safeguard public health, and protect American agriculture from recurring crises.

### ***Broad Bipartisan Support for Action***

The ACE Act has more than 450 endorsing organizations, including more than 200 law enforcement agencies. Congress has also repeatedly signaled its support: in 2019, the House voted 380-51 (**Roll Call #373**) to pass an amendment urging the DOJ to establish a dedicated animal cruelty prosecutors’ unit; in FY 2022, the Senate Appropriations Committee urged the DOJ to create an animal cruelty section; and the FY 2026 CJS bill now recommends \$2 million in dedicated funding to launch this unit. With bipartisan leadership from Representatives Dave Joyce, R-Ohio, Joe Neguse, D-Colo., Juan Ciscomani, R-Ariz., and Steve Cohen, D-Tenn., leading ACE and Josh Gottheimer, D-N.J., and Nicole Malliotakis, R-N.Y., introducing the FBI ACT Act, Congress has a distinct opportunity to address the plague of animal cruelty crimes.

