



Guest opinion: Revive HB279 to discourage animal fighting

5 HOURS AGO • BY WENDY HERGENRAEDER

Montana has the ugly distinction of being the only state in the nation where it's legal to be a spectator at a dogfight. With the support of The Humane Society of the United States, law enforcement officials, other animal welfare groups and constituents, state lawmakers have been working hard to change that. On Feb. 14, a House committee tabled a bill that would have finally closed the gaping spectator loophole in the state's animal fighting law.

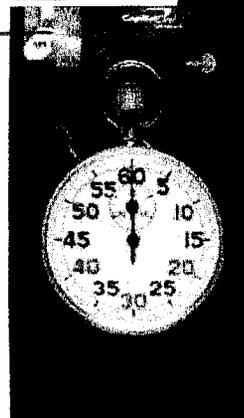
House Bill 279 would have made attending an animal fight illegal. This is legislation that is needed, and is a simple fix to the state's statute to bring it in line with progress made nationwide in other states. In 49 states, criminal penalties exist for spectators at animal fighting. In 29 of those states, the penalties are felony-level.

Like any underground crime, animal fighting only thrives because spectators — the bloodthirsty individuals who fuel its criminal enterprise — gamble money on it. In dogfights, for example, spectators do not accidentally stumble across them. They seek out the criminal activity at secret locations, and they often need passwords to enter. They pay hundreds or thousands of dollars in admission fees and gambling bets, generating the bulk of the revenue for this illegal enterprise.

Spectators provide cover for animal fighters, who blend into crowds for a slap on the wrist at the first sign of a police raid. Lawmakers must recognize not only the cruelty involved in animal fighting, but the public-safety risk that it poses to our communities. The HSUS is thankful for the lawmakers and House Agriculture Committee members who backed HB279. The bill, introduced by Rep. Virginia Court, D-Billings, has widespread supporters who filled the committee room at the hearing. They included a local Girl Scout troop that has taken up the cause; animal control officers for the cities of Deer Lodge and Billings; representatives with the Montana Veterinary Medical Association, Montana Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association and Humane Society of Western Montana; and Yellowstone County Attorney Ingrid Rosenquist, on behalf of the Montana County Attorneys Association.

Animal fighting spectators clearly are not innocent bystanders — they are willing participants in organized crime who attend for their own amusement and gambling profits, and because they are titillated by the bloodletting. Take away the spectators and you take away the profit.

Law enforcement officials and prosecutors need legislation like HB279, so that they can bring the entire cast of characters involved in this cruel spectacle to justice. Our



laws should be tough enough to stop people from financing the torture of animals. It's time to resurrect this legislation in Montana, and not let another year go by in which the people who finance staged animal fighting rings get off scot-free.