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COMMITTEE ON RULES

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

SENIOR DEMOCRATIC WHIP

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
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U.S. Sentencing Commission
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Dear Commissioners:

Late last year, the Honorable W. Keith Watkins, a U.S. Federal Judge in Alabama, handed down strong sentences for the ringleader and other key members of a large-scale animal fighting enterprise involving over 450 dogs. As a result of a four-year federal investigation, some of these defendants will serve sentences of up to eight years in prison. During the sentencing portion of the trial, Judge Watkins noted the need for upward variances for these sentences. Current federal sentencing guidelines for animal fighting are inadequate for such large-scale operations and the level of animal cruelty they inflict.

Animal fighting has no place in a civilized society, and the American public demands strong penalties for this heinous crime. Congress has addressed animal fighting many times. Rep. Tom Marino and I recently led efforts to include in the 2014 Farm Bill the first federal penalties for spectators at animal fights, as well as additional penalties for bringing a child to these barbaric events.

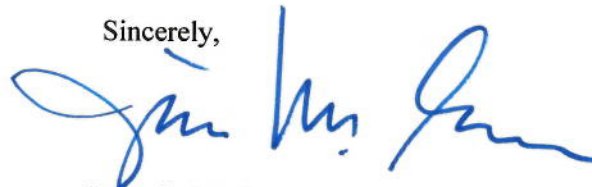
Prior to that most recent change to the federal animal fighting statute, Congress added to the 2008 Farm Bill a provision that raised the statutory maximum penalty for animal fighting to five years in prison. However, the Commission has not updated its guidelines to reflect this change.

Additionally, the current sentencing recommendations categorize animal fighting with gambling offenses, a status which fails to consider the violence and brutality that distinguish animal fighting from other gambling crimes. Although spectators' wagers and admission fees provide financial incentives for the crimes, the immense suffering and cruelty inherent in animal fighting is unique to this criminal category.

I respectfully ask that the Commission increase the base-level offense of its sentencing guidelines for animal fighting. The updated guidelines should not only reflect the increased statutory maximum passed by Congress in 2008, but also establish an elevated base-level offense for crimes that involve a large number of animals and/or extreme levels of animal neglect or cruelty.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

JM:MC