

DAVID VITTER
LOUISIANA

DEPUTY WHIP

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Border Security Subcommittee
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Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Hart Senate Office Building
Suite SH-516
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-4623
Fax: (202) 228-5061

BATON ROUGE

858 Convention Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802
(225) 383-0331
Fax: (225) 383-0952

Website with
E-Mail Access: vitter.senate.gov

April 15, 2015

The Honorable Patti B. Saris
Chair, U.S. Sentencing Commission
One Columbus Circle, NE, Suite 2-500
Washington, DC, 20002-8002

Dear Chief Judge Saris:

In the fall of 2014, a U.S. Federal Judge in Alabama handed down sentences for six of fifteen defendants convicted as the result of a four-year long federal animal fighting investigation which involved over 450 dogs. As a result, the ringleader and other key members of this heinous dog fighting enterprise will be serving sentences of up to eight years in prison. In each of these sentences, the judge noted that upward variances were required because the sentencing guidelines for animal fighting were inadequate and failed to take into account the abject cruelty and the large number of dogs in this particular case.

Animal fighting has no place in our society, and the American public wants those convicted of this crime to be punished accordingly. Congress has addressed animal fighting many times, including adding an amendment to the 2008 Farm Bill that raised statutory maximum penalty for animal fighting to five years' imprisonment. However, the current sentencing guidelines have not incorporated this increase and do not reflect the heightened seriousness with which Congress, the public, and many judges view this terrible crime.

Additionally, the current sentencing recommendations, which are categorized with gambling offenses, fail to account for the violence and brutality that distinguish animal fighting from other gambling crimes. Though gambling is the driving force behind it, animal fighting is unique to this category of crime because inflicts immense suffering and death on its victims.

In order to address these concerns, we ask that the U.S. Sentencing Commission increase the sentencing guideline's base level offense for animal fighting to the increased statutory maximum passed by Congress. We also ask that you provide an elevated base level offense when the offense involves a large number of animals or entails extreme animal neglect or cruelty.

ACADIANA	CENTRAL LOUISIANA	NORTHEAST LOUISIANA	NORTHWEST LOUISIANA	SOUTHEAST LOUISIANA	SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA
2201 KALISTE SALOOM ROAD SUITE 201 LAFAYETTE, LA 70508 (337) 993-9502 FAX: (337) 993-9567	6501 COLISEUM BOULEVARD SUITE 700-A ALEXANDRIA, LA 71303 (318) 448-0169 FAX: (318) 448-0189	1651 LOUISVILLE AVENUE SUITE 148 MONROE, LA 71201 (318) 325-8120 FAX: (318) 325-9165	920 PIERREMONT ROAD SUITE 113 SHREVEPORT, LA 71106 (318) 861-0437 FAX: (318) 861-4865	2800 VETERANS BOULEVARD SUITE 201 METAIRIE, LA 70002 (504) 589-2753 FAX: (504) 589-2607	949 RYAN STREET SUITE E LAKE CHARLES, LA 70601 (337) 436-0453 FAX: (337) 436-3163

Obtaining fitting and meaningful sentences for animal fighting will allow federal prosecutors and law enforcement to better deter these criminal acts. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "David Vitter", with a stylized flourish at the end.

David Vitter
United States Senate