

Cockfighting operations busted

By Ashley Meeks/Sun-News reporter

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BERINO — You can see one of the cockfighting rings from Vistoso Loop, about chest-high white board and circled at top with a chain-link fence. Behind and to the side are the two rows of now-empty white metal cages, each equipped with an upside-down bleach bottle of food.

Around 300 roosters were taken in Berino at the first four stops of a multi-agency operation Saturday that was set to gather several hundred more roosters at three other sites throughout the night, said Doña Ana County animal control supervisor Curtis Childress.

The alleged operators didn't just fight their birds — all with red combs shaved to the skull and spurs chopped to tie on a boot and thin, curved knife — they bred and sold them across state and international borders, Childress said.

"We've effectively shut them down, because we've taken all their stock," including some hens and chicks, Childress said, which will make it harder for cockfighters in other states to supply their games.

"We're basically putting an end to the blood line completely."

Full-scale operation

At the rambling rural property on Vistoso Loop, more roosters — and some chickens, one with a brood of still-downy chicks — were housed in a pre-fight "staging area" and in cages behind the main building, so many that some were housed in cages jury-rigged from evaporative cooler panels strung together with nylon cord.

Among the evidence seized: wood blocks and cleavers for beheading birds, used syringes, intricately decorated locked boxes containing velvet-lined drawers of shiny, thin gaffs and blades, containers marked "for veterinary use only" in Spanish, and a 2000 schedule of fights from the Chaparral Game Club, on which someone had scrawled, in Spanish, "inject three days before match."

Two other raids were also conducted on multiple sites, two at neighboring sites on Salt Bush Drive and two sites 17 miles south on Koogle Road, in the La Union area.

Four arrests, more likely

Four Berino men — Ramon Torres, 47, Ernesto Torres, 46, and Armando Rosales, 44, and Guillermo Torres, age unknown — were charged with cockfighting. Childress said it was unknown if they were related. Though each man's charge was his first — a petty misdemeanor — Childress said felony charges were pending and further busts were forthcoming.

The New Mexico Legislature in 2007 approved a ban on cockfighting, making it a petty misdemeanor for the first offense, a misdemeanor for the second offense and a fourth-degree felony for each subsequent offense.

"We're watching their properties. We are listening to the tips that are coming in," Childress said. In addition to three fights broken up in January, new tips, mostly about backyard fights, come in every month, he said. "Today was a total surprise to the Berino area and will be a blow. (Fellow cockfighters) have no idea what these guys are telling us."

Childress said euthanasia for the birds, who appeared to have been pumped with steroids, vitamins and painkillers, was unavoidable: "We surely aren't going to allow them to get back into the population, to be used."

"Just the sheer number of them," marveled county codes enforcement officer Jay Morrison. "It's just, who's going to want them? I'm an animal-lover, I don't want to kill things, but ... these people are the ones who bought them, raised them, trained them as fighting birds and we've got to dispose of them."

The multi-agency operation took weeks of surveillance before Saturday's action, which involved Doña Ana Sheriff's Department investigators, members of city and county code enforcement and animal control officers, county animal control reserves and mounted patrol, the DASO Crime Scene Unit, John Goodwin, of the Humane Society of the United States, and Heather Ferguson, a founding member of the New Mexico attorney general's task force on animal cruelty.

Animal suffering

Goodwin called the activity truly "disgusting."

He recalled picking up a bird still wearing its knife at a previous raid. The bird was motionless — when he turned it over, he saw that it had just been filleted in a fight.

"You could see his internal organs move with every breath," said Goodwin, manager of animal fighting issues with the Humane Society of the United States, on Saturday.

Goodwin has assisted in raids in Louisiana, Virginia and New Mexico, including the December 2007 raid of the Otero Game Club in Chaparral — considered the third-largest in the state — at which more than 100 birds were seized and four people were arrested.

He called Saturday's action a "very large sweep."

"The goal is to let cockfighters know New Mexico will not ever be a safe haven for this crime," Goodwin said. He added, "cockfighting has no socially redeemable value."

Nor did he say the "cultural" argument held up, noting how farm-workers' groups and the League of United Latin American Citizens had endorsed making cockfighting a felony: "I don't think it's fair to put that baggage of cruelty on any one group," Goodwin said.

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