Cockfighting ban fails again in House panel

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For the third time in less than a month, lawmakers turned back a push to outlaw cockfighting in Louisiana.

The latest attempt Thursday drew dozens of protesters from the cockfighting industry, who argued cockfighting is deeply rooted in the tradition and culture of Louisiana.

But Rep. Garey Forster, R-New Orleans, who filed a bill, HB1983, to ban cockfighting, called it a “blood sport where animals are forced to fight to the death.”

Animal rights activist Pinckney Wood said Louisiana is one of only five states that allow cockfighting.

Wood played a 1980 video that showed two trainers attach razor-sharp “gaffs” to the legs of two roosters, then fighting them until one of the gamecocks was lifeless on the ground.

Rep. Steve Windhorst, chairman of the House Committee on the Administration of Criminal Justice, said he “wasn’t so shocked” by the video, noting chickens raised commercially also are subjected to prolonged inhumane treatment.

Hilton Cole, director of the East Baton Rouge Animal Control Center, said cockfighting has managed to circumvent Louisiana’s animal cruelty law because the law says fowl aren't animals. “If they’re not vegetables and they’re not minerals, what are they?” Cole asked.

Cole said East Baton Rouge and several other parishes have passed their own laws to ban cockfighting.

On the other side of the issue, J.W. Smith of Sulphur said cockfighting is a sport practiced in Louisiana from Lake Charles to the Pearl River. “It’s not like ballet; it’s not for everyone,” Smith said.

Smith said those in the cockfighting industry give gamecocks top-notch treatment to keep them in proper fighting form. Smith reminded the House panel that Louisiana is known as a sportsman’s paradise. “Let’s not take all the sport out of paradise,” Smith said.

Rep. Tony Perkins, R-Baker, acknowledged fighting may come naturally to gamecocks, but said it isn’t natural to arm the roosters with blades and force them to fight like gladiators. “Human beings may fight in the street, but we don’t put them in an arena with guns and knives and force them to fight to the death,” Perkins said.

Perkins’ motion to approve the bill, that is, to outlaw cockfighting, was defeated by a vote of 3 for and 5 against. Supporting the cockfighting ban were Reps. Perkins, Louis “Woody” Jenkins, R-Baton Rouge, and Rep. Donald Ray Kennard, R-Baton Rouge.

Voting to kill the anti-cockfighting bill were Reps. Beverly Bruce, D-Mansfield; Reggie Dupre, D-Houma; Rob Marionneaux, D-Livonia; Arthur Morrell, D-New Orleans, and Erol “Romo” Romero, D-New Iberia.

The House committee vote marked the third setback in less than a month for animal rights activists. A Senate committee killed an anti-cockfighting bill, and the full Senate rejected an attempt to amend another bill to outlaw cockfighting.

Animal rights supporter Pinckney Wood, center left, talks to Rep. Garey J. Forster, D-New Orleans, during a presentation by the proponents of cockfighting in the House Criminal Justice Committee on Thursday. Forster’s bill to outlaw cockfighting failed in the committee.