LAFAYETTE — It goes on almost every night in barns and makeshift arenas across Acadiana and the state.

Spectators gather to watch and wager on one of Louisiana’s oldest pastimes, cockfighting. And while some enjoy the spectacle, others say it is a tradition they hope will soon come to an end.

Currently, Congress is considering legislation that would prevent out-of-state bird trainers from transporting their birds to states with legalized cockfighting. A cockfight, also known as a chicken fight, features two roosters, each with sharp aluminum spurs or small knives taped to their legs, fighting in a caged area. The fight ends when either one rooster dies or the trainer or referee stops the fight.

The measure, HR1275, was proposed by U.S. Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn. The bill has passed the Livestock and Horticulture Subcommittee and now moves to the full House Agriculture Committee.

It would then have to pass the House and the full Senate before being sent to the president. A similar measure passed the full Senate earlier this year. However, the probability that U.S. Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss. and the Senate majority leader, will call the matter for a vote, is low.

For some Acadiana residents, cockfighting is entertainment to which they feel entitled.

“This is something I and many others enjoy doing,” said Lafayette resident Darrell Domingue, who keeps birds at his Lafayette Street home. “These birds are bred to fight. It’s in their nature.

“Cockfighting has been around for hundreds of years. It’s our tradition and we’re not hurting anybody by doing it.”

For others, Louisiana’s legal cockfights are a blemish on the state and are viewed as a vicious, cruel spectacle that should be outlawed. As one of only three states to still allow the display — along with New Mexico and Oklahoma — animal rights’ activists and even some everyday citizens want to see it outlawed.

“Instead of enhancing our culture, we seem to do everything we can to make ourselves look like a pack of fools,” said Acadiana resident Carolyn Levy. “We have the highest rate of adult illiteracy in this state, yet we have cock fights.
None of Acadiana’s federal representatives plan to support the legislation. Only U.S. Rep. Chris John, D-Crowley, indicated where he stands on the issue.

John said he is a major supporter of cockfighting, calling the measure “a back-door swipe at an industry.”

“It’s a way of life to some people,” John said. “Some people earn their living that way.”


Ken Johnson, a spokesman for Tauzin, said the congressman has been monitoring the bill’s progress very closely. Because of the limited number of legislative days left, Johnson said the likelihood of something happening this year is light.

“This bill is a backdoor approach to banning cockfighting,” Johnson said. “Billy, as a strong state’s rights advocate, believes it’s a decision that should be made at the state level.”

Bill author Peterson, who is known as pro-hunting and trapping, said he is not an animal right’s advocate. But, in a statement released by his office, he said “cockfighting isn’t something we should be doing.”

But Charlie Sandoz of Erath, who raises and sells his chickens all over the world, said it doesn’t seem right for a man from Minnesota to “play around with my life.”

For Sandoz, 70, cockfighting and selling fighting fowl is not only a family tradition. It is his livelihood. He sells his roosters in all 50 states and to places across the world, including Guam, the Philippines and Mexico.

He sells his roosters for as much as $1,000 each, and sells the eggs for as much as $200 a dozen. When asked what effect legislation would have on him, his answer is a simple one.

“It would absolutely ruin me,” said Sandoz, who has been selling a lot of his stock in case he gets caught by the legislation. “We’ve been in the chicken business for a long time, and we’ve never seen anything like this legislation that would blatantly rob us of our way of life.

“People talk about how bloody and cruel it is. But it’s like a lot of things. If you don’t like it, don’t watch it. You have that choice. And I should have the choice on how I live my life.”

An act of cruelty?

The argument made by those against cockfighting is a simple one — it’s cruel to the animal. But for a lot of people, another major reason to ban the sport is the way that other states perceive Louisiana.

“One of the major arguments made by the people who do this is, ‘the birds are going to fight anyway,’” said Dennis J. White, Southwestern Region director of the Humane Society of the United States. “But what they fail to mention is that it’s not natural for these birds to strap on spurs or knives to fight. Also in the wild, there wouldn’t be people sitting in the stands betting on which bird is going to win.

“I just don’t buy that argument.”

White said he is hopeful that an election this fall will outlaw cockfighting in Oklahoma. But beyond that, he said the likelihood of state bans on the blood sport by Louisiana and New Mexico is unlikely.

“Our best hope for these states is that the federal law will be passed putting a stop to this,” White said.

Esther Mark, co-founder of the Lafayette Society for the prevention of cruelty to animals, said she does not foresee the state of Louisiana banning cockfighting.

“I wholeheartedly support any legislation that even remotely affects the economy of cockfighting,” Mark said.

“If it has to come through the backdoor, via the U.S. Congress, so be it.”

But whether the law passes or not, Domingue said cockfighting will survive in one form or another.

Aluminum spurs, 1¾ inches long, often are attached to the roosters’ legs during fights.