Dogfighting Bill Changes Okayed

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - If the sheriffs "don't play foosie" with people who like to watch dogs chew on each other in arenas, an amended bill outlawing dogfighting should work, its author says.

Sen. Ted Hickey of New Orleans made that comment Thursday as he asked his colleagues to accept changes made in his bill by the House - amendments that proponents of the original bill said would gut the concept of prohibiting the vicious sport.

The bill, if signed into law by Gov. Dave Treen, will call for fines of up to $1,000 and jail for up to a year for operators of the fights and for the dog owners.

The fights generally occur in rural Louisiana, especially in south Louisiana, at night and as secretly as possible.

The House decided to amend Hickey's bill after lawmakers from rural Louisiana defended the bloody fights as "part of a heritage."

"It's wrong to change a custom close and dear to us," said state Rep. John John of Crowley.

"There are a lot worse things," said Rep. Raymond "La La" LaLonde of Sunset, who pushed through the major House amendment on Wednesday.

"Hang in there, La La," called out Rep. Margaret Lowenthal of Lake Charles during the debate.

The amendment passed the House of Representatives on a vote of 45-41 ... the bill went back to the Senate, which approved the measure by a vote of 36-0.

A large crowd of pit bull owners from rural areas where dogfights are popular applauded loudly at Wednesday's vote.

The original bill said if anyone had reason to suspect that a dog had been in an arena fight, a warrant could be obtained immediately. The dog could then be checked by a veterinarian for proof.

The change was simple. It said authorities had to prove that a dog had been in a dogfight during the 48 hours before it was picked up.

Practically speaking, it meant that the only way anyone could be arrested would be if they were caught on the spot during a raid.

LaLonde got strong support from John, who said, "When you go meddling with people, with a way of life, and talking about putting them in jail, you're fooling with things that are important, meaningful for certain people. Some things have been handed down from our forefathers.

"They do fight dogs. It's part of a heritage they were raised with, a thing they're proud of...It's wrong to change a custom close and dear to us."

The amendment also would delay the date that the bill would become law. "Sixty days to give the owners time to sell their dogs," LaLonde said.

"We can really be proud," Rep. Peppe Bruneau of New Orleans said sarcastically. Bruneau handled the Senate bill in the House. "You owners both there have another six months to bet on dogs and let them chew each other apart."

Actually, the joke may be on the dogfighting enthusiasts, said Bruneau. He said the House a few minutes earlier Wednesday had approved a bill to clarify the law against cruelty to animals.

"I strongly suggest you read that first bill, which will outlaw dogfighting just as this one," he said.