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2017 Southeast Regional Animal Cruelty Prosecutions Training Held at Valdosta State University

The United States Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Georgia, the Environmental Crimes Section of the United States Department of Justice's Environment and Natural Resources Division, and the United States Department of Agriculture – Office of Inspector General hosted training for the Southeast region on animal cruelty prosecutions, Dec. 13-14.

This training represents the collaboration and coordination of federal and local agencies and offices to combat crimes of animal cruelty, including organized dog fighting, cock fighting, and horse soring. The conference provided participants with an overview of the federal animal welfare and cruelty statutes, investigation techniques, and strategies to overcome prosecution challenges. The Humane Society of the United



States, along with prosecutors and federal agents, shared their experience in handling dog fighting and animal cruelty cases strengthening the response to these serious crimes.

“Fighting contests involving dogs and other animals are morally wrong and illegal, said United States Attorney Charles E. Peeler.” They also create havens for additional illegal conduct such as gambling, drug trade and unlawful gun possession. Our office works with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies to identify and prosecute those involved in this reprehensible conduct.”

“Ending animal fighting ventures and other inhumane practices will require a close partnership

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among federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies,” said Acting Assistant Attorney General Jeffrey H. Wood of the Justice Department’s Environment and Natural Resources Division. “Our Division is proud to be a leader in this worthy cause and to participate in this important training event in the wonderful city of Valdosta, Georgia.”

“The USDA OIG is pleased to have worked closely with the Department of Justice to coordinate this important training initiative to combat animal fighting and the associated crimes which often occur in animal fighting ventures,” said Special Agent in Charge Karen Citizen-Wilcox for the USDA OIG Southeast Region Office of Investigations. “Special Agents from all of the OIG’s regional offices will share their knowledge of and experiences with animal fighting investigations with personnel attending from other law enforcement agencies and private organizations.”

During the training, animal fighting investigators from the Humane Society of the United States, along with prosecutors and USDA OIG agents who have successfully investigated and prosecuted animal fighting cases, shared their experiences with attendees. Instructors provided participants with an overview of the business of dog fighting, a description of federal animal welfare and cruelty statutes, effective investigative techniques, evidence collection best practices, available resources and authorities for the seizure and post-seizure care of animals and successful sentencing strategies.

State and national animal control associations estimate that upwards of 40,000 people participate in dog fighting in the United States at a professional level, meaning that dog fighting and its associated gambling are their primary or only source of income. An unknown but potentially larger number of people participate in dog fighting on an occasional basis. Cockfighting is thought to be similarly widespread. In addition, animal fighting activities attract other serious crimes, such as gambling, drug dealing, weapons offenses and money laundering. Children are commonly present at animal fighting events.

The federal Animal Welfare Act makes it a felony punishable by up to five years in prison to knowingly sell, buy, possess, train, transport, deliver, or receive any animal, including dogs, for purposes of having the animal participate in an animal fighting venture. In 2014, the Department of Justice designated the Environment and Natural Resources Division as the centralized body within the Department responsible for tracking, coordinating, and working with the U.S. Attorneys’ Offices on animal cruelty enforcement matters.

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