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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, May 15, 2017

## Clintwood Man Sentenced on Conspiracy Charge

### Jimmy Crate Willis Sponsored Animals to Fight at Big Blue "Sportsmen's Club"

ABINGDON, VIRGINIA – A Virginia man, who sponsored animals during cockfights at the Big Blue Sportsmen's Club in McDowell, Kentucky, was sentenced today in the United States District Court for the Western District of Virginia in Abingdon, Acting United States Attorney Rick A. Mountcastle and Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring announced.

Jimmy Crate Willis, 78, of Clintwood, Va., previously pled guilty to one count of conspiracy to knowingly sponsor and exhibit an animal in an animal fighting venture. Today in District Court, Willis was sentenced to 1-year probation, a fine of \$250 and a \$100 special assessment.

According to evidence presented at previous hearings, Shirley and Vernon Slone owned the property in McDowell, Kentucky that housed the Big Blue Sportsman's Club, a 5,000-member club that hosted cockfights for more than 20 years. The facility, a 10,000 square-foot building that featured arena-style seating, multiple fighting pits and a restaurant, was the site of a law enforcement raid in 2014. Federal charges relating to cockfighting, gambling and narcotics arose out of the investigation.

To date, nine individuals have been convicted for their roles in the cockfighting conspiracy run out of the Big Blue facility. Most recently, Russell D. Peaks, who raised fighting birds in Wise County, Virginia, and brought them to Big Blue to fight, was sentenced to 24 months in federal prison for allowing a minor to attend a cock fight, distribution of hydrocodone and conspiracy to facilitate cockfighting.



In 2014, Walter Stumbo was sentenced to 18 months for his role in the Big Blue conspiracy, Joshua Stumbo and Sonya Stumbo were each sentenced to 10 months in federal prison for their roles in the conspiracy. Jonathan Robinson was sentenced to 12 months and one-day in federal prison and Wesley Robinson was sentenced to 6 months in prison.

In March 2017, the owners of the facility Shirley Ray Slone, 73, and Vernon Kelly Slone, 69, both of McDowell, Kentucky, each pled guilty to one count of conspiracy to cause others to attend a cockfight. In addition, the pair forfeited \$100,000 and agreed to pay for the complete destruction of the 10,000 square-foot facility known as the Big Blue Sportsman's Club

In addition to forfeiting \$100,000 and paying for the destruction of Big Blue, the Slones each face up to one year in prison and a fine of up to \$100,000. They are scheduled to be sentenced on June 8, 2017 at 2:30 p.m. in U.S. District Court in Abingdon.

Assistant United States Attorney Randy Ramseyer and Special Assistant United States Attorney/Virginia Assistant Attorney General Michelle Welch are prosecuting these cases on behalf of the United States. The case is being investigated by the United States Department of Agriculture – Office of Inspector General, the Virginia Alcohol Beverage Control Bureau of Law Enforcement, and the Spotsylvania County Sheriff's Office. In addition, the following agencies assisted in the arrests or related proceedings: Virginia Animal Fighting Task Force; Virginia State Police Tactical Team; Southwest Virginia Regional Task Force; Botetourt County Commonwealth's Attorney's Office; Wise County, Virginia, Sheriff's Office and Commonwealth's Attorney's Office; Virginia State Veterinarian's Office; United States Homeland Security Investigations; Kentucky State Police; the United States Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Kentucky; and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

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