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Dog tracks should be required to report injury

In the coming weeks, lawmakers in Tallahassee are expected to hammer out a compromise on casino gambling. Greyhound racetracks are heavily involved in these negotiations, and track managers are hoping that lawmakers will bail them out by legalizing slot machines at their facilities.

No deal should be struck until policymakers first look at the dog-racing industry from a humane perspective.

Before considering any further dog-track bailouts, lawmakers should pass a law requiring that racetracks report greyhound injuries to the public. Most states that have dog tracks require injury reporting, and in recent years, GREY2K USA, a greyhound-protection organization, has received injury data from these states by submitting public-information requests.

In analyzing these data, GREY2K USA has documented severe problems. For example, in Massachusetts nearly 900 greyhounds were reported injured between 2002 and 2009, including dogs that suffered broken bones, paralysis and cardiac arrest. Nearly 80 percent of reported injuries involved broken legs. In New Hampshire, nearly 1,200 greyhound injuries were reported at three dog tracks between 2005 and 2008.

The data from these two New England states are just the tip of the iceberg. At one West Virginia dog track, more than 700 greyhound injuries were reported between January 2008 and September 2009. At two Arizona dog tracks in 2008, more than 500 greyhounds were reported as injured or too sick or too hurt to race. Similar figures were reported in 2008 at dog tracks in Texas (342), Iowa (101), Wisconsin (361) and Kansas (80).

In Florida, humane advocates have fought for years for a reporting law, but have not yet succeeded, in part because of the opposition of the Florida Greyhound Association, a lobbying group that represents greyhound breeders and owners.

While Floridians do not yet have access to greyhound-injury reports, we do know that serious greyhound injuries occur in the Sunshine State. According to the Department of Business and Professional Regulation, two greyhounds suffered fatal injuries during a three-day span in November 2008. On Nov. 17, a 3-year-old brindle greyhound named Birthday Toy was electrocuted during a race at Sanford



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Two days later, a 2-year-old fawn greyhound named Jawa Spock was euthanized after breaking both back legs during a race at Palm Beach Kennel Club. With 13 dog tracks, it is likely that hundreds, if not thousands of greyhounds are suffering a similar fate each year in Florida.

Concerns regarding greyhound injuries are not the only problem with dog racing. At racetracks nationwide, greyhounds are kept in small cages, barely large enough for them to stand up or turn

around in, for long hours each day.

Additionally, between 2000 and 2003, more than 100 greyhounds in Florida tested positive for cocaine, a stimulant that could affect the outcome of races. These problems, and others, have led the humane community to the conclusion that dog racing is cruel and inhumane.

While lawmakers debate proposals to perpetuate racetracks, voters increasingly support measures to end greyhound racing. Just last year, Massachusetts citizens voted to phase out dog racing. In a survey GREY2K USA commissioned in 2004, 50 percent of Florida voters supported ending dog racing, while 37 percent were opposed.

Finally, it is worth noting that greyhound racing is a dying industry, and dog tracks are closing across the country. During the past five years, 20 dog tracks have closed or ended live racing, cutting the industry in half. Between 2002 and 2007, the total amount gambled on dog racing nationwide declined by 42 percent, and gambling at Florida dog tracks has dropped by 36 percent since 2002.

Legislators should not further entrench the dog-racing industry without first examining these humane issues. For decades, lawmakers in Tallahassee have consistently voted to bail out greyhound tracks. It's time for them to finally cast a few votes for the dogs.

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