

Greyhound injuries bill important for transparency

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We support bills, filed in the Florida House and Senate for this year's legislative session, to require state greyhound tracks to report injuries.

It is a bill that did not pass last year because it was tied to a much larger gaming bill. Legislators appear to be making it a priority now. It was the second bill filed in the Senate, and president Andy Gardiner promises he will fast track it. He wants the bill, named for former Sen. president Don Gaetz's wife, Vicki, who is an animal lover, to be the first bill sent to the House during the first week of the legislative session, which begins March 3 in Tallahassee.

The bill is important for transparency and the safety of the animals. It should never have been attached to the gaming bill, which wasn't going to pass last session because of all the legal complications and possible compact violations with the Seminole Indians over casino gambling. By the time legislators realized they needed to break of the injuries portion of the bill, it was too late in the session and there wasn't enough time for adequate discussion.

Animal rights groups have long lobbied for such a bill and for a reduction in the number of races required at each of the state's 12 tracks. What also deserves serious discussion and change is why these tracks offer so many races in the first place, especially for a sport, that is illegal in all but seven states.

The racing schedule is still bound by a 1997 law that allows track owners to operate poker rooms only if they operate 90 percent of the races that were conducted when the law passed.

The Naples-Fort Myers track in Bonita Springs already operates more races than any other track in the country as it did when the law was passed. Although the local track has a good safety record, the more races run opens the opportunity for more injuries and deaths. The other critical factor is greyhound racing is not profitable for these tracks money. In fact, Florida tracks lost \$35 million in 2012.

Animal rights groups have worked for years on a "decoupling" bill that would allow tracks to reduce their racing schedules, with the ultimate goal to eliminate racing and end the risk for these animals. Grey2K USA, a greyhound protection group, supports both the injury bill and is pushing for decoupling.

There has been a dramatic decline in the amount gambled on racing. From 1990 to 2013, there was a drop of 72 percent from over \$900 million to less than \$300 million. The amount of taxes and fees collected also has declined significantly (about 97 percent), even though the number of live races has dropped just 8 percent.

Requiring an injury report from each of the tracks does make a difference. In Massachusetts, for example, the number of dogs euthanized dropped 43 percent in the first year after the passage of a bill. By the sixth year, dogs euthanized had declined 88 percent.

Only two states – Alabama being the other – do not have a law requiring injury reports. In Florida, tracks are required to report dog deaths thanks to the passage of a bill two years ago. The public is also entitled to accurate information about injuries. Hopefully, it also will cut down on any abuse that might be occurring at tracks. There is no question public opposition to this type of racing has increased over the years.

State Sen. Garrett Richter, R-Naples, chaired the gaming committee the last two years in the Florida Senate. He heard the stories about the treatment of the dogs and how important it was for full disclosure of injuries.

There will be no gaming committee during the legislative session this year. It was primarily established to deal with the larger gaming questions and the compact with the Seminole tribe, which controls the gaming destinations in the state and its reluctance to give up control. That compact and the proprietary rights of destination casinos is a major reason why referendums passed several years ago, including one in Bonita Springs, to allow for slot gaming at greyhound tracks, have not moved forward. Slots will be a major revenue producer for these facilities, and now that the gaming committee is gone, its future will be in the hands of the regulated industries committee.

But first things first. Let's get the bill passed to report injuries.



File: Greyhounds racing on a track
(Photo: Thinkstock)