

Bills target greyhound safety at tracks



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(Photo: Jack Hardman/The News-Press)

Greyhound racing is slated to be a big issue in Tallahassee this spring as legislators file bills to improve safety in the industry.

So far, five bills relating to greyhound tracks have been filed. They range from requiring facilities to report injuries, not just deaths, and prohibiting people convicted of certain violent crimes from working with the animals. The legislative session begins March 3 in Tallahassee and runs through May 1.

A bill "decoupling" racing from poker rooms, however, has not been filed. Since 1996, dog tracks have had to run dogs to keep their poker room licenses, despite losing millions of dollars per year.

Florida is one of seven states that allows greyhound racing. Once a popular sport, most states have outlawed the practice, leaving only 21 dog tracks in the U.S. Of these, more than half are in Florida.



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Greyhound injuries bill important for transparency

Unlike other states, greyhound racers in Florida don't have to report to the state whenever dogs are injured in racing or training. SB 2, filed in December by Sen.

these injuries.



Handlers escort greyhounds to be inspected prior to competing in races at the Naples Fort Myers Greyhound track on Saturday. (Photo: Jack Hardman/The News-Press)

"It's all about treating these dogs in a fashion you'd treat your own personal pet," she said.

The companion bill in the House, HB 129, is sponsored by Rep. Jared Moskowitz, D-Coral Springs.

The bill is called "Victoria Q. Gaetz Racing Greyhound Protection Act" after the wife of Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, and is co-sponsored by Sen. Garrett Richter, R-Naples.

The bill is in the same vein as a 2013 statute that requires tracks to report racing deaths. Between January 2013 and March 2014, 93 greyhounds died, according to state records.

Naples-Fort Myers track owner Izzy Havenick said he supports the safety bill because, despite regulatory headaches, he wants to do the right thing for the greyhounds at his facility.

"We support anything to improve the well-being and safety of these animals," he said.

"Will it be more burdensome? Yes. Will it make things more onerous? Yes, but we want the best for these dogs."



Greyhounds are escorted out on the track by their handlers at the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound track on Saturday. (Photo: Jack Hardman/The News-Press)

Adding injury reporting requirements will not only give state regulators more information about where and how greyhounds are being injured but could also cut the number of dogs euthanized each year, said Carey Theil, executive director of GREY2K USA, a national greyhound protection organization.

Massachusetts approved a greyhound injury reporting law in 2001 and the number of dogs euthanized declined by 43 percent in the first year, he said.



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Greyhounds race; greyhound advocates protest

"Every time we've seen one of these bills passed, the following year we see the number of greyhounds killed decline," Theil said. "A lot of times these dogs have treatable injuries, but they're euthanized anyway."

Another pair of bills, HB 187 and SB 226, prohibit the state from granting licenses or permits to work with greyhounds to applicants convicted of certain crimes, including animal cruelty and aggravated assault. It also prohibits giving certain substances to racing animals.



Greyhounds compete at the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound track on Saturday. (Photo: Jack Hardman/The News-Press)

If Havenick had his way, he wouldn't have to worry about injury reporting because fewer dogs would race. Greyhound racing loses him more than \$2 million a year as fewer and fewer people wager on the sport. The Legislature, however, has failed to pass a decoupling bill that would sever racing requirements from poker licenses.

Havenick said he's optimistic that decoupling, if not proposed in a separate bill, will be part of a larger gambling bill.

"We're really forced by the state to lose two and a half million (dollars) a year to run races no one's watching," he said. "I think they'll sort it out because it doesn't make sense now."

Greyhound bills filed

House Bill 129/Senate Bill 2

Requiring tracks to report injuries to dogs.

House Bill 187/Senate Bill 226

Outlaws the use of certain drugs to racing animals

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