

Report: Ebro records 20 dog deaths in 2014

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EBRO — The life of a racing greyhound is fraught with treacherous circumstances.

In 2014 in Florida, 193 greyhounds died as a result of racing injuries, according to the Florida Division of Para-mutuel Wagering. Ebro Greyhound Park had 20 such cases.

A report from Grey2K USA, a group against greyhound racing, cites 11,722 racing injuries, but that number does not include data from Florida, where injury reporting is not a law. Florida has more dog tracks than any other state in the country with 12. Of the 12 states with dog racing, no other state has more than two tracks.



Ebro provided information on injuries between 2001 and 2006. Of the about 124,000 dogs that raced in that period, there were 244 injuries, or about 44 injuries per year.

“Toes get broken; around the turn they’re beating against each other,” Ebro Associate Manager Rick Hess said Wednesday. “There is a lot of energy.”

The Grey2K report has 594 cited sources. It points out instances of inhumane treatment in the greyhound racing industry, including that some kennels have cages not big enough to allow a greyhound to stand, citing the American Greyhound Council on the size of the dogs. Florida has a state-mandated kennel size of 36 inches long, 24 inches wide and 32 inches tall. The Florida Greyhound Association (FGA) states all of the 3,000 breeders in the state use cages that meet the requirement. The report cites kennel inspection report that had 28 instances of two dogs living in the same cage.

Another statistic cited in the Grey2K report is that dogs are fed meat from diseased animals, which the FGA said is not used in Florida. One more is that female dogs are injected with anabolic steroids or testosterone to interrupt ovulation. The Grey2K report includes 10 sources where dogs were given or injected with drugs. In Florida and Alabama, 16 dogs tested positive for cocaine since 2008.

The report also showcased severe cases of neglect by breeders and kennel operators around the country. The worst of those cases occurred at Ebro more than four years ago.

Thirty-seven dogs were found starved to death on the Ebro kennel compound in a state investigation Oct. 29, 2010. Washington County Sheriff Bobby Haddock called it the worst case of cruelty to animals he had ever seen.

Trainer Ronald Williams pleaded no contest to 39 counts of cruelty to animals, and he is currently serving five years in prison.

“That guy was a really evil man; we’re disgusted about that,” Hess said in an

interview Wednesday. "He's a disgrace to the industry and the world."

Unbeknownst to most people, the track operators at Ebro have a limited amount of control over the trainers and kennel operators. The track provides a kennel, big enough for 800 dogs in 3-by-4-foot cages, but it contracts with an operator who brings the dogs in. Since 2010, Ebro has instituted kennel inspections in the off-season and now keeps a full-time security guard year round.

"When it happens on the property, you want to take responsibility," Hess said. "You can't hover over people 24 hours a day."

Ebro was not alone. At Pensacola Greyhound Track, state investigators interviewed witnesses who stated that 22 greyhounds from the kennel were euthanized in a five-day period in 2009. The dogs were killed after being examined by a veterinarian, who indicated they were severely underweight and some were suffering from pressure sores.

Decoupling at issue: "This is not a Republican or Democrat issue," said state Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville. "This is a common sense, moral issue. Florida should not continue to be a subsidizer of the death of dogs."

Grey2K Executive Director Carey Theil and Humane Society Director Kate MacFall believe the best way to stop Greyhound racing, which the Grey2K organization is designed to do, is to decouple racing from other forms of gambling. They are asking Florida legislators to craft a decoupling bill; Gaetz said a new decoupling bill might be coming soon.

At Ebro, as in other parks in Florida, there is a poker room that features simulcasts of dog races from around the world. In the 2012-13 fiscal year, the track lost \$2.9 million on racing — with expenditures like track and kennel maintenance — but made \$2.05 million from the poker room.

"Nobody likes to have their hands tied to something," Hess said. "We're a gambling facility; we believe in a level playing field."

Part of Grey2K's report finds that tracks around the country are losing money on racing at a similar rate. The total amount gambled on greyhound racing dropped from just under \$2 million in 2001 to about \$750,000 in 2012. In part, this decline has led to seven tracks closing in Florida since 1991.

However, the thought of the free market correcting itself with one simple law change is not quite accurate. Hess said Ebro receives tax credits on some greyhound racing dollars. If the facility were restricted just to its poker room, he said the loss in revenue from credits would about wash out the money saved if racing ended.

With just the poker room, Hess said Ebro could keep more than half of the 100 employees.

"If your job depends on an industry where there is cruelty and unnatural death of animals, maybe you should find another job," Gaetz said of breeders.

That does not mean Ebro does not support decoupling. They just also want slot machines, which Washington County voters approved in a January 2012 referendum. The state denied the use of slot machines based on an agreement with the Seminole nation that controls many casinos in Florida.

Therein lies the rub for a politician like Gaetz, who opposes gambling: Is it worth it to eliminate greyhound racing but replacing it with casinos? The answer, at least for Gaetz, is no.

“You have to watch bills that deal with pari-mutuel racing; they go beyond the structure. People add stuff to it,” Gaetz said. “If it was a pure decoupling bill, I would likely support it. If expansion of gambling were added, two things would happen: one, I would not vote for it. Two, it would not pass.”

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