

Greyhound dies on Fla. track every three days



STEVE DOANE, SDOANE@NEWS-PRESS.COM 12:56 p.m. EST February 2, 2015



(Photo: News-Press File Photo)

A greyhound died on one of Florida's dog tracks about every three days between June 2013 and December 2014.

A News-Press review of data and reports compiled under the state's death reporting rule shows 192 greyhounds died in that 19-month period.

The rule requires track operators to notify the state within 18 hours of a greyhound's death on a track. The requirement went into effect in the spring of 2013.

Derby Lane in St. Petersburg lead the state with 25 deaths, followed by Orange Park Kennel Club in Orange Park with 23. With only two deaths, Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Racing and Poker was tied for the fewest number of incidents with Melbourne Greyhound Track in Melbourne, according to state records.

Some of the dogs were euthanized after sustaining severe injuries on the track, others died of natural causes and some died for unknown reasons, according to state records.

Both deaths at Naples-Fort Myers happened in November 2013. One animal was euthanized after sustaining a severe leg break, the other was unspecified, according to reports.

Track owner Izzy Havenick credits the low number of deaths to a combination of good fortune and track safety measures.

"We are very pro-doing all the humane things," he said. "We hold all the trainers at our track to a high standard and we hold ourselves to a high standard."

Florida is one of seven states that allows greyhound racing and is home to more than half of the 21 dog tracks still operating in the U.S.

It's unclear whether the number of reported deaths in the state is high, low or where it was expected to be because the rules are so new, Havenick said.



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Others, like GREY2K USA, a national greyhound protection organization, found it too high.

"I do think that number is disturbing," said Carey Theil, executive director of the organization. "My sense, however, is the death rate has declined slightly and that's the result of increased transparency."

According to the Florida Greyhound Association, which represents dog owners and trainers, track owners are to blame for many dog injuries and deaths because they've failed to invest in improvements to their facilities.

"The only way we're going to stop injuries on the track is to remedy what's causing the injuries," said Jack Cory, a spokesman for the greyhound association.

Despite the accumulated data on deaths, the state and Legislature haven't enacted additional safety requirements, which means dogs keep dying from the same things, he said.

Where to go from here

Unlike other states, greyhound racers in Florida don't have to report when dogs are injured in racing or training. Several legislators are looking to change that.

So far, five bills relating to greyhound tracks have been filed. They range from mandatory injury reporting to 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.

The most prominent of these bills, SB 2, was filed in December by Sen. Eleanor Sobel, D-Hollywood, and would impose a fine on track veterinarians who don't report these injuries. The bill is being vetted by the Senate's fiscal policy committee and is co-sponsored by Sen. Garrett Richter, R-Naples.

Adding injury reporting requirements will give state regulators more information about where and how greyhounds are being injured and could also help cut the number of dogs euthanized each year, Theil said.

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

In Florida, many see the best way to bring down injury and death numbers is to "de-couple" greyhound racing from poker rooms. Since 1996, dog tracks have had to run dogs to keep their poker room licenses, despite losing millions of dollars per year.

"We always say the best way to reduce deaths and injuries is to reduce the number of races we're being forced to run," Havenick said.

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