

3,200 Racing Greyhounds in Florida Could Retire if Law Passes, Dog Advocate Predicts

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2016 AT 9:25 A.M.

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Set them free!

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For years, animal lovers have been fighting to end greyhound racing in Florida. Today, that goal could be closer to reality if two bills pass through their respective committees in the state legislature. If they become law, says a greyhound advocate, about 3,200 of Florida's active racing greyhounds could retire.

For decades, Florida law has been structured so that dog and horse racetracks were permitted to offer slots and poker — but only as an addition to their racing operations.

Carey Theil, head of Grey2k, an organization that works to end greyhound racing, explains that when legislators first moved to allow gaming at tracks, dog breeders cried that their livelihoods would be lost. "Breeders said, 'This is going to hurt us! You have to protect us!' So the law was written in a way that really protected them. It was a bad law then, and it's a bad law today."

Public opinion has changed over time. Now, most bettors go to tracks to play slots and card games, while the popularity of animal racing has declined. Indian casinos have in the meantime been allowed to offer slots and cards without the obligation of running horses or dogs.

Theil says that of the 19 tracks that remain around the country, 12 are in Florida. The amount gambled at dog tracks declined by 73 percent between 1990 and 2014. "The industry really is in a freefall," Theil says. "All 12 tracks are losing money on dog racing — collectively, they're losing \$40 million a year."

Greyhound lovers have for years been fighting for "decoupling" — which would let tracks offer their games without having to offer racing. It would give the tracks the choice.

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Theil says that 2016 marks the sixth year his group has pushed a decoupling bill, and that it has passed full chambers of the legislature several times, but always stalled before becoming law because the big picture of gambling in the state is complex, and "leaders say that everything needs to happen together — the Seminole compact, greyhounds, other gaming. It's frustrating, because we have the votes while some of these other measures don't have the votes."

This year, though, the legislature is considering Gov. Rick Scott's proposal to renew a gaming compact with the Seminole Tribe. If it passes, the state will receive \$3 billion from the tribe's gaming operations. But the proposed legislation includes pieces that would affect stakeholders like the various racetracks around the state, Disney World (which competes for tourist dollars), and more. "It's delicate and very complicated politically," says Theil.

Theil explains two bills that comprise "this big package" will be up for committee vote today: "One bill that simply ratifies the new compact and a companion bill that deals with everything else — greyhound decoupling, a requirement that greyhound injuries be reported. It cracks down on parimutuel permits —there are all these dormant permits from racetracks that are not being used; they would be required to relinquish those to the state. It's a 100-page bill that deals with all these changes."

Theil believes that the fates of both measures are tied but he is optimistic they will pass. "If they pass in initial committee, we'll be off and running... This is our best chance in a number of years."

He says there are currently 8,000 greyhounds being raced in the state and they are "suffering needlessly" being caged much of their lives and forced to race.

If the gambling bills pass, he predicts that some tracks will close down, and the remaining tracks will absorb their customers. "Of the 12 tracks," Theil muses, "three to five will close completely; another three to five will go to reduced schedule." In Naples, he says, because of the way the law is written, the track there was required to offer 90 percent of the racing it offered before it got its poker room. "So they race constantly." If the bill passes, those dogs may get some rest.

"There's a provision that the Palm Beach Kennel Club can have slots if they buy permits from the other tracks around the state and close them down," theoretically increasing gambling at the club but causing an overall reduction in gambling. "But even with that, any addition of slot machines becomes politically complicated because other tracks say, 'Why aren't we getting slot machines?'" Disney, anti-gambling groups, the tribes, other racetracks — "they're all very influential in Tallahassee," Theil says. "They all have different interests and competing interests."

Even if the Kennel Club were to increase its dog racing, and maybe even see a profit instead of a loss if the other tracks close, Theil says the net effect for the state would be that 40 percent of the state's 8,000 greyhounds (that's 3,200) would no longer be needed. That would be a "huge decrease" in racing, he says. Regardless of how it plays out, Theil says, he predicts that "you will see greyhound racing in Florida phased out completely in a decade or two."

"Think about it nationally — there's 19 tracks left with 600 million being bet. At its peak, that number was 3.5 billion... There's a small pool of gamblers who are betting on these races and they're slowly dying off."

Theil says that if the bill passes today, it is likely to go through one more committee, then to a floor vote. Updates would be posted on his website.