

Greyhound-racing industry could get more scrutiny

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In an opening-day victory for animal-rights activists, the Florida Senate unanimously passed a bill Tuesday requiring dog tracks to report all injuries of racing greyhounds.

The bill, if also passed in the Florida House, would make the number and type of injuries at the tracks and kennel compounds public record — a move activists hope would eventually turn Floridians against dog racing.

Florida and Alabama are the only two states that don't currently require injury reporting.

"Racing greyhounds are prone to injuries, which can often lead to horrible pain and premature death," said Sen. Eleanor Sobel, D-Hollywood, the bill's sponsor. "Injury reporting is a simple step that will lead to fewer deaths and a better quality of life for these precious animals."

Many track owners support the requirement as well, hoping that greater transparency would bolster their contention that the dogs are well cared for.

Mike Newlin, general manager of the Sanford Orlando Kennel Club in Longwood, said he favors the injury-reporting requirement — as long as it's uniform.

"I think it should cover any injury that keeps a dog from racing its normal schedule. I don't think it should be a dog that breaks a toenail," he said.

In a session where other proposed bills on greyhound racing are entangled in contentious gambling issues, the injury-reporting requirement has deep support, said Senate President Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando.

The passage comes on the heels of a newly released nationwide report on the number of deaths among racing greyhounds. According to the nonprofit advocacy group GREY2K USA, which took its data from state inspectors, 909 greyhound deaths have been documented since 2008. In Florida, home to 12 of the nation's 21 dog tracks, 183 racing dogs died from May 2013, when a mandatory death-reporting law took effect, to November 2014. That's an average of one every three days.

Newlin said the figures are misleading.

"The numbers don't explain that some of those deaths are from natural causes," he said. "One of the dogs here had a tumor in his mouth and couldn't eat. A couple of the dogs had seizures, which is a common problem for greyhounds. ... We have spent almost \$200K in the past three years on improvements to the [track] system that make it safer for the dogs."

The "Victoria Q. Gaetz Racing Greyhound Protection Act" — named after the wife of Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Destin — was the first bill to pass on the opening day of the session. It requires all injuries to racing greyhounds be reported to the state Division of Pari-mutuel Wagering in the Department of Business and Professional Regulation within seven days.

The bill itself doesn't specify what types of injuries would qualify for reporting, although the report would include the details of what happened, where it happened, the cause of the injury and the estimated recovery time. Typically, injuries range from muscle tears to broken legs to paralysis.

Carey Theil, executive director of GREY2K, applauded the Senate's passage but said he remained cautious.

"Our nonprofit has been fighting in the Florida Legislature [on dog-racing issues] for more than a decade," Theil said. "So to have this be a leadership issue from Day One of the session is very exciting. The trick for us of course is getting the bill to the governor's desk."

Though some 39 states have banned greyhound racing — and 41 tracks have closed or discontinued live racing since 1991 — the sport has persevered in Florida. That's largely because of the state's quirky regulations, which require tracks that might prefer to get out of the business — or at least cut back — to continue holding races in order to also offer poker, slot machines and other, more lucrative forms of gambling.

Not only do those facilities have to keep racing dogs to stay in business, they have to run 90 percent of the races they held in 1996, when the Legislature legalized poker rooms, in order to keep their gaming licenses active.

Efforts to "decouple" greyhound racing from other gambling have failed in recent years, though lawmakers will try again this session.

Unlike other tracks in Florida, Sanford-Orlando has no other gambling operations outside of live and simulcast racing. There are no poker rooms or slot machines. And unlike other tracks, attendance and wagering have both increased since 2012, Newlin said, although live racing slumped during the previous decade.

"In the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s, dog racing was a huge sport in Florida," said Izzy Havenick of Magic City Casino, whose third-generation family business owns two dog tracks in South Florida. "But the world was a different place then. Back then, I thought the world was a nice, happy place where people were going to like me. ... Now we are in 2015, and we still have to conduct business like it's 1996."

If decoupling passes — a far tougher battle than the injury reporting — some tracks would likely drop the sport altogether, some would cut back and others might increase the number of races.

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