



The time is right to roll back dog racing in Florida

By CHALMERS MORSE
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A day before the 2015 legislative session opened, an omnibus gambling bill was filed in Tallahassee. This comprehensive measure is the first salvo in what will undoubtedly be a robust debate on the Seminole compact and wagering in general.

Regardless of what the Legislature decides on these gambling issues, it should pass a policy known as “decoupling.” This will eliminate the state’s dog-racing mandate and let the free market decide whether greyhound racing stays or goes.

Eighty-four years ago, Florida was the first state to legalize greyhound racing. In the decades that followed, parimutuel wagering on dogs grew into a multibillion-dollar industry that at its peak was legal and operational in 19 states. This popularity, however, was short lived.

Since 1991, 41 dog tracks have closed or ended live racing. One state after another has turned back the clock on this 20th-century anachronism, and it is now illegal in 39 states.

The disintegration of greyhound racing is partly due to increased awareness about animal welfare problems. Cruel dog track conditions have been extensively documented, and were highlighted again this month with the release of the first national report on greyhound racing by humane groups GREY2K USA and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

More than 80,000 young greyhounds have entered the racing industry since 2008. Each track requires a population of up to 1,000 dogs, and as a result greyhounds are kept in warehouse-style kennel compounds, in cages that are barely large enough for them to stand up or turn around. Dogs are confined for 20 or more hours per day. To cut costs, the racing industry uses standard practices that are inhumane. Female greyhounds are routinely given anabolic steroids to prevent estrus, and dogs are fed raw “4-D” meat from downed animals. According to the Food and Drug Administration, this meat is a “potential health hazard” to both dogs and their handlers.

Greyhounds are also harmed while racing — since 2008, nearly 12,000 injuries have been documented. More than 3,000 of these injuries involved broken legs, and other reported injuries included crushed skulls, electrocutions and broken necks.

These statistics include almost no data from Florida, even though we host the majority of remaining tracks. Unfortunately, we are one of only two states, along with Alabama, that does not publicly report injury data.

Although we don’t know how many greyhounds are injured each year in our state, we do know that a racing dog is dying, on average, every three days in Florida. Similarly, at least 909 racing greyhound

deaths were documented nationwide over the past eight years.

This debate also affects taxpayers. Florida is losing money on greyhound racing because regulatory costs exceed revenues. Further, a 2011 study by Auburn University and the College of Charleston found that dog racing tends to have a negative impact on state revenues in the jurisdictions in which it exists. As an economic activity, greyhound racing has collapsed. Since 2001, gambling on dog races nationwide has dropped by a staggering 66 percent.

Greyhound racing has failed so miserably that it now exists in only seven states, where it is being artificially propped up by subsidies and archaic state mandates. In our state, 12 dog tracks lost a whopping \$42 million on racing between 2012 and 2013 and only hold races because they are required to by law in order to have poker rooms.

The economic failure of dog tracks also affects animal welfare. Over the past eight years, at least 27 cases of greyhound cruelty and neglect have been documented, including dogs that were starved to death or denied veterinary care. These cases occurred in all seven racing states, and eight of them happened in Florida. During the same period, at least 16 greyhounds tested positive for cocaine.

As Floridians, we have an obligation to speak up for the dogs. We were the first state to let this inhumane genie out of the bottle and bear some responsibility for the suffering that has occurred nationwide.

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