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FLORIDA VOICES

Lawmakers move to ease racing's cruelty

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As dog lovers, our idea of a dog sport is throwing a ball in the park or playing chase. But in Florida, greyhound racing — a sport for the gamblers, but not for the unfortunate dogs they're betting on — is not only still legal, but forced upon business owners in the state.

Florida is one of the last states in the nation to legally force track owners to run thousands of greyhound races each year. At least 202 racing dogs have died on Florida's greyhound tracks since May 2013 — on average, a racing dog dies every three days, and thousands more have been injured or discarded once they can no longer race.

Thankfully, state House Majority Leader Dana Young has proposed legislation that calls for an end to the live racing mandate, prohibits future permits, and requires full injury reporting for as long as greyhound racing continues. It deserves the Legislature's full and speedy support.

Greyhound racing is not a sport that the state government should be propping up in such a dramatic way. Last November, a 1-year-old pup named PorPorPitifullMe was electrocuted when he ran into a high voltage rail at the Palm Beach Kennel Club. A dog named Head Games flipped in the air, broke his spine and was left to die in his cage at the Florida Kennel Compound days before.

Florida tracks do not report greyhound injuries, but injury reporting requirements from other states show an industry that produces a steady stream of canine casualties. In West Virginia, 6,000 injuries have been reported at two tracks since 2008. And at one track in Texas alone, nearly 2,500 dogs have suffered injuries in the last seven years.

The greyhound racing industry has resorted to doping of dogs with drugs in order to enhance their performance and to get injured dogs into the starting gate. According to the Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering, 19 dogs have tested positive for cocaine since 2008. Florida consumers have caught on to the industry, to a very large extent. According to a comprehensive study commissioned by lawmakers in 2013, the amount of money bet on live racing has declined by 72 percent since 1990. Go to any of Florida's 12 greyhound tracks on the weekend and you'll find plenty of people gambling inside, but a lot of empty seats by the racetrack. It's no surprise then that track owners lost \$35 million in 2012 alone.

So why is this cruel and unprofitable industry still in business? The answer, incredibly, is your tax dollars. For decades, the greyhound industry has lobbied for taxpayer subsidies and competition restrictions in a form of crony capitalism that should make all conservatives see red.

The 2013 independent report commissioned by the Florida Legislature found that

the state spends as much as \$3.3 million more regulating dog tracks each year than it collects in tax revenue. When we want practical examples of government waste, and the overreaching hand of government authority, look no farther than greyhound racing in the Sunshine State.

It is time for this taxpayer-subsidized cruelty to end. The state needs to get out of the business of forcing track owners to hold races, and of propping up a cruel and archaic industry with your tax dollars.

Rep. Young's legislation is a positive step in this direction. We support this common-sense approach that will save dogs' lives and restore millions to state coffers. Americans love their dogs, and it's past time that we show it.

Dorchak is president of greyhound protection group GREY2K USA Worldwide and Pacelle is president and CEO of The Humane Society of the United States.

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