

In Florida, the greyhounds and taxpayers are losing

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A visit to a Florida greyhound kennel provided me a firsthand glimpse into the reality of dog racing.

It was summer 2011, and I had the opportunity to go to the Jefferson County Kennel Club (JCKC) in Monticello. As I entered the compound, I hoped that I would be able to rescue at least one greyhound before leaving.

Guided inside by one of the workers, I inquired about adoption. Pointing to the double-stacked rows of caged dogs, she asked which one I wanted to take. It was that simple. No paperwork, no questions, I could just pick one.

I knew from state investigation reports that these dogs spent an average of 20 hours to 23 hours a day in small barren cages. There were no toys provided for them, and they had no real opportunity to socialize with each other. Forty pairs of eyes followed me as I tried to pick which dog would live and which would be left to fate.

JCKC was a low-end track, where greyhounds were sent when they were no longer competitive elsewhere. Over the past decade, we have repeatedly received confidential tips about the killing of unwanted dogs at this facility. One tip, from a prominent greyhound adoption group, claimed that “kill trucks” showed up each week like clockwork. Even people in the industry — other kennel operators, owners and trainers — had nothing but bitter feelings about what happened to dogs that ended up here.

The owner of the kennel showed me around to a back corner where there was a small refrigerator, a worn-out counter and what looked like a little bathtub. I saw several white boxes labeled “Meat. Not for human consumption.” This was “4-D” meat from downed and diseased animals, and the bathtub was used to add pasta or rice to the meat before feeding it to dogs. According to the industry handbook, “Care of the Racing Greyhound,” such substandard meat is the most common feed used at racetrack kennels because “[I]t is the most economically feasible for the Greyhound industry at this time.”

What really struck me was the expendable nature of greyhounds I saw. To my surprise and without any prompting, the kennel owner told me that some dogs “just don’t come back” after a race.

Florida is now one of only two states, along with Alabama, that does not publicly report racing injuries. Records are kept internally but rarely shared outside kennel walls. Documentation that has recently come to light, however, suggests a serious problem. New state records show that a racing greyhound dies every three days in the state. Additionally, according to a special investigation by the Division of Racing, 28 greyhounds suffered “substantial” injuries, and 10 greyhounds were destroyed during one six-week period at Ebro Greyhound Park in 2011. A three-year old brindle greyhound named Birthday Toy was one of several dogs electrocuted while racing in Florida, and other injuries have included broken necks and backs, crushed skulls and the most common injury, broken legs.

Full injury records may still be shrouded in mystery, but one thing is not. Florida’s greyhound racing industry is dying. Tax revenues generated since 1990 are down 98 percent, and dog racing revenue no longer covers regulatory costs. An independent report prepared for the Legislature by the Spectrum Group estimates that live greyhound racing cost the state between \$1 million and \$3.3 million in 2012 alone.

The taxpayers are losing, and so are the greyhounds.

Lawmakers have again failed to pass proposed legislation that would have allowed live dog racing to wind down this year. Now more than ever full injury reporting and the promotion of available dogs should be fast tracked.

A proposal by Sen. Eleanor Sobel, Senate Bill 742, has passed two committees and is nearing the legislative finish line. Lawmakers should make sure they pass this important measure before adjourning in early May.

Thankfully, I was able to leave with not one, but two, greyhounds the day I visited Jefferson County Kennel Club. Together, we can help the rest.

Christine A. Dorchak, Esq., is president of GREY2K USA, a greyhound protection and adoption advocacy organization with more than 50,000 supporters. A nonprofit 501(c)4 organization, the group works to pass stronger greyhound protection laws and end the cruelty of dog racing on both national and international levels.