

Changes to help Florida racing dogs

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Greyhounds run at the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track in Bonita Springs. Greyhound trainers will soon have to be more transparent with their dog care.

Greyhounds run at the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track in Bonita Springs. Greyhound trainers will soon have to be more transparent with their dog care. / news-press.com file photo

Watching a recent Bonita Springs greyhound race, Cape Coral's Cathy Anselmini couldn't help but think about the welfare of the eight muzzled racing dogs before her.

How well are trainers taking care of the greyhounds? Are they sleeping in separate cages? Are the cages clean? Are their injuries being rehabilitated?

"Sometimes I feel bad for them," Anselmini said as the dogs chased a white mechanical rabbit around the track. "It seems like horses get a lot more respect because they are a big animal."

Florida greyhound trainers will soon have to be more transparent with their dog care. A new state animal welfare rule goes into effect Tuesday requiring trainers to notify state regulators every time a dog dies at a track or kennel. Trainers at the state's 13 greyhound tracks also will be banned from keeping more than one dog per cage and be forced to maintain a roster that identifies each dog. Racetrack officials have to complete weekly walk-throughs of kennels.

In the 91-year history of dog racing in Florida, the state has never had such greyhound regulations. While they're disappointed the state didn't require injury reports or mandatory greyhound urine breaks, dog activists say the new rules are a watershed moment for the industry.

"When you're dealing with 8,000 dogs racing on Florida tracks each year, modest changes like this really do make a huge impact," said Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, a nonprofit group focused on ending greyhound racing. "This is the most significant step forward for greyhound welfare in many years. I think thousands of dogs are going to live slightly better lives."

The new rules stem from a bill passed by the Legislature three years ago. Tucked inside the bill was a sentence saying the state shall protect the health and welfare of greyhounds. After a myriad of workshops and drafts, the Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering filed the rules this month.

Division investigators will enforce the rules during track inspections, said Ronnie Whitaker, chief of staff for the Department of Business and Professional Regulation. The division has made 1,825 facility visits, 470 barn inspections, and 963 kennel inspections over the last fiscal year.

Owners could receive fines of \$1,000 for each offense and may have their pari-mutuel license suspended or revoked, Whitaker said. Criminal prosecution could occur for animal cruelty.

Bonita Springs dog owners James Blanchard and Kelly Everett say they are adhering to the rules. They say their greyhounds have individual crates that are a minimum of 2 feet wide, 3 feet long and 32 inches high as the new rules state.

"I agree with the rules," said Blanchard, who owns 300 dogs. "This will show the facts of what's really happening here. People think if a dog breaks its leg that we put them down. That doesn't happen. So this is going to help us in the long run. It will show the fraud of what some people are saying."

Grey2K USA argues most Florida greyhounds are normally confined in cages for 20-23 hours per day. They say owners sometime place two dogs in a cage. They say dogs are kept in warehouse-style kennels in rows of stacked cages, with shredded paper or carpet remnants as bedding.

The group also points to several cases of neglect. In 2010, for example, state investigators found 37 dead greyhounds during an inspection of the Ebro Greyhound Park kennel compound in Washington County in northern Florida. The dogs, many of which were double-crated, died of dehydration or starvation.

A third-generation greyhound trainer, Blanchard said he loves dogs. He said he's forced by the state to keep his greyhounds in cages or else he would let them run around between races. He said dog muzzles are for safety.

Blanchard estimated just 1 percent of his dogs are euthanized each year. He said he often rehabilitates injured dogs with whirlpools and ultrasounds and puts them up for adoption.

"I've never had one of my dogs attack me," Blanchard said. "If my dogs are so mistreated why is it when you see them they are always wagging their tails and jumping up and down? If they were being tortured, they would be cowering in the corner."

Injury and dog death reporting laws have had impacts in other states. Massachusetts, for example, approved a greyhound injury reporting law in 2001 and in the first year the number of dogs euthanized declined by 43 percent. Massachusetts voters outlawed dog racing in 2008.

"When injuries started being reported in other states, there is talk about broken legs that could be fixed," Theil said. "The bottom line is there is a direct relationship between transparency and the welfare of the dogs. When there is greater transparency, the dogs end up having better results."