

Greyhound racing has animal rights activists championing free markets

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DOG TIRED: Greyhound racing wagers and tax collections have declined dramatically since 1990.

By William Patrick | Florida Watchdog

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — By the numbers, greyhound racing in Florida is a net loser. Yet old state regulations force track owners to offer live races despite millions of dollars in losses.

It's an odd distortion that has animal rights activists stepping in and championing free-market economics.

"If you leave this to the open market, Florida's 12 tracks will shrink to four or five tracks within a year. Within a decade, there will be virtually none," Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, told Watchdog.org. Grey2K is an organization dedicated to ending "the cruelty of dog racing."

But to operate other more profitable forms of gambling — such as poker rooms — state laws from the 1970s require that dog tracks continue live racing.

But according to the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, wagers and tax collections have declined dramatically since 1990. The total handle taken in by tracks is down 73 percent, and state tax and fee revenue has dropped from \$76 million to \$1.5 million in 2012.

Will Patrick breaks down the numbers the politics behind the dog fight over dog racing in Florida.

<http://watchdog.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2014/05/Will-Patrick-breaks-down-the-barks-and-the-yelps-over-dog-racing-in-Florida.mp3> [2]

The number of live races is nearly the same.

"Literally, these facilities have become profitable poker rooms with dogs running around in circles outside with no one betting on them," said Theil.

Florida is one of only seven states that offers greyhound racing. In 2012, track owners lost a combined \$35 million.

"It is a dying sport," Michael Glenn, general manager of the Palm Beach Kennel Club, told the Spectrum Gaming Group. The Florida Legislature commissioned Spectrum — at cost of \$388,000 — to study the state's gaming environment.

"Decoupling (removing the requirement for minimum performances) will help us in the short run as we would run fewer races which, in turn, will lower our operating costs. Our simulcast (television) revenue will also increase, but there just are not enough folks out there to come to the track and wager on these races. There is not any interest," Glenn said.

PBKC, one of the country's premier venues, would shut down the dog track if it could, reported Spectrum.

Greyhounds are typically kept in cages for as long as 20 hours a day, and state records suggest race-related injuries are common.

Opposition to removing the mandate comes from some anti-gambling groups who say the tracks would soon become mini-casinos. Greyhound breeders also have a lot to lose, but Theil says the racing mandate is a government subsidy for the breeders.

"It's the equivalent of automobile companies being forced to produce and sell horse-and-buggy fixtures, or forcing electronic stores to sell 8-tracks. It doesn't make any sense," said Theil.

The market arguments aren't lost on the Republican dominated state Legislature. But passing a bill is a different story.

Florida is one of two states — the other is Alabama — that does not require that greyhound injuries be officially reported. A bill requiring injury notification passed the state Senate this year, 40-0. Multiple attempts were made to add "decoupling" language to the bill, but the House failed to take it up.

The Legislature intended to pass a comprehensive gambling reform, but that also never happened.

Despite broad support from track owners, there's no shortage of using the legislative process to advance interests.

"The Palm Beach Kennel Club is very powerful," said Theil. "They support decoupling, but their position is that no one should get anything, that no bills should pass, until they get slot machines."

The state has a gambling compact with the Seminole Tribe of Florida that partly expires next year. If lawmakers don't renew it, the state could lose millions in revenue. Track owners and Grey2K USA are looking to resolve the issue during proposed negotiations.

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