

Group makes new pitch to end greyhound racing

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TALLAHASSEE — As some legislators renew a push to slash dog racing requirements from state law, animal rights activists released a report Tuesday highlighting extreme cases of greyhound abuse.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals called for quick passage next session of a bill that failed earlier this year. The legislation would end a measure that requires cardroom licensees, like the Naples Fort Myers Greyhound Track and Poker, to offer a minimum number of live races each year.

Aside from animal welfare groups, the bill has the support of many track owners who lose money on racing.

“We’re just hopeful that something will be done that will benefit the business,” said Isadore Havenick, an executive at West Flagler Associates, which owns the Bonita Springs track.

He said his facility is required to hold more than 400 events — eight races each — per year, a number much greater than the actual demand. The mandate costs him \$2.5 million annually, he said.

Some experts anticipate a smoother path for the bill during this session. Earlier this year, legislation decoupling card rooms and dog racing passed both chambers but died on the final day of the 2011 session.

The ASPCA and a greyhound advocacy organization, GREY2K USA, condemned Florida’s dog racing industry in the Capitol Tuesday.

They said 8,000 dogs in kennels across the state often have no room to stand or turn around. Dogs have died from heart attacks, one was electrocuted, and between 2000 and 2003, 119 dogs tested positive for cocaine, including in Bonita Springs, the group reported.

“It is hard, I think, for anyone to look at this report and not come to the conclusion that dog racing is cruel and inhumane,” said Carey Theil, executive director of GREY2K USA.

If a law decoupling greyhound racing and cardrooms passes, the groups say some pari-mutuel gaming facilities will stop live racing altogether and others will scale back the number of races they offer.

While Havenick supports their stance on the bill, he denied ill treatment of dogs.

“In all sports there are injuries,” he said. “While we don’t own the dogs, we do everything in our power to provide a safe facility for them.”

Marc Dunbar, a gaming lawyer and lobbyist for horse racing operations, vouched for West Flagler Associates’ reputation for animal care. But he said the bill is unfair to companies that are required to run 40 horse races per year.

“Horses would like to see dogs come down to our level,” Dunbar said. “We would support the dogs coming down to 40, and treat everybody the same.”

Kennel owners across the state, represented in Tallahassee by the Florida Greyhound Association, will strongly oppose the measure, because of potential jobs losses in that industry.

Attempts to reach a representative for the Florida Greyhound Association were unsuccessful Tuesday.

