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Using live rabbits costly to dog racer



By **Mary Jo Pitzl**
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The use of live rabbits to train racing dogs has cost a greyhound breeder and owner his contract to race in Phoenix and forced a temporary suspension of his state racing license.

State regulators late last week barred Gregory Wood from racing after documenting his use of domestic rabbits in training greyhounds. Investigators found at least 180 rabbits at Wood's kennel in Maricopa.

It is illegal to use live animals such as cats, rabbits or fowl for training, in part because the animals rarely survive the training or are severely injured by the practice. Artificial lures are used at dog parks and are the preferred training method.

The news comes as the debate over expanding casino-style gaming to Arizona's racetracks continues to heat up the political landscape. And it follows the lodging of two criminal charges against a Prescott-area man for dumping dead racehorses in the Prescott National Forest.

Racetrack critics were quick to use the developments to their political advantage.

'Political committee'

"We formed our political committee because we felt a cruel industry shouldn't be rewarded with slot machines," said Stephanie Nichols-Young, chairman of the Arizona Greyhound Protection Alliance. "The fact that both of these incidents came up so close to the election just shows me how dirty the industry is."

A spokeswoman for the Arizona Racetrack Alliance said the track where Wood had been racing his dogs ended Wood's contract as soon as the state findings were known.

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"He is barred and banned forever from racing at Phoenix Greyhound," said Amy Rezzonico, an alliance spokeswoman.

"This is proof that regulation works. These things are taken very seriously."

Wood, when contacted for comment, hung up the telephone.

A four-month investigation by the Arizona Department of Racing found that Wood, operator of Gregory Wood Kennel in Maricopa, used live rabbits to train greyhounds. Stewards at Phoenix Greyhound Park told Wood late last Friday that he could not race his greyhounds, citing the findings of the state investigation.

It is the first time the state has documented the use of live lures in training greyhounds. There are 44 licensed greyhound facilities in the state.

It was unclear from the report, obtained under the state's Public Records Law, how many rabbits were injured or died during training exercises at the Maricopa kennel.

On Oct. 7, investigators observing Wood's operation from a nearby knoll saw a rabbit attached to a training device known as a whirligig. When they arrived on the property, the investigators found a "nearly dead rabbit" just outside the gate leading to the training area. The rabbit died.

The report estimates that there were at least 180 rabbits on the property and indicated that Wood agreed to help Pinal County's Animal Care and Control Department remove them. Jean Decker, director of the animal-control office, said 88 rabbits were taken from the kennel by the end of last week. Her office was able to place 20 of them with the Humane Society of Southern Arizona, but the rest were euthanized for lack of a place to keep them.

"We don't have facilities for rabbits or livestock," she said. "We tried to do what we could."

Racing stewards, two of whom work for the Racing Department and one who was hired by Phoenix Greyhound Park, have scheduled a Thursday hearing to consider Wood's case.

They could continue his racing suspension for up to 60 days, weigh whether to levy a fine of up to \$500, or permit him to return to racing.

Horse case

Meanwhile, state investigators are cooperating with the Pinal County Attorney's Office on a criminal investigation. County officials did not return calls for comment.

Late last month, a Prescott-area man was charged with two criminal littering counts for dumping at least three dead racehorses in the Prescott Forest. Richard Silva faces an Oct. 29 preliminary hearing in Mayer Justice Court.

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