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Report: 707 dogs hurt in 21 months at W.Va. track

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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) — A national group determined to outlaw greyhound racing says 62 dogs died or had to be euthanized at a West Virginia racetrack between January 2008 and September 2009, while more than 700 were injured, some suffering leg and skull fractures and spinal injuries.

GREY2K USA, a Massachusetts group that helped outlaw racing last year in that state, said Friday the injury rate at Wheeling Island Hotel-Casino-Racetrack is the highest of any track it's studied so far.

Executive Director Carey Theil said his organization has conducted similar analyses of greyhound injuries at tracks in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Arizona, Texas, Iowa, Kansas and Wisconsin.

"Dogs are suffering broken legs and other serious injuries on a daily basis," he said. "This is the West Virginia dog racing industry's dirty little secret."

Wheeling Island officials did not immediately respond to repeated requests for comment Friday.

GREY2K's numbers for Wheeling Island are based on reports kept by the state veterinarian who works at the track and were obtained from the West Virginia Racing Commission after seven Freedom of Information Act requests, Theil said.

His staff spent two months studying the data, which he called "dense and complicated, and internally contradictory," consulted with the doctor who compiled it and is confident its numbers are accurate.

The West Virginia Racing Commission declined to comment on the report, referring questions to veterinarian Lori Bohenko. She did not immediately return telephone messages.

GREY2K said it was unable to obtain injury data from West Virginia's other greyhound track, Tri-State Racetrack & Gaming Center in Nitro. A copy of a Sept. 17, 2009, letter from Vice President Daniel Adkins says the track does not maintain any public records on injuries.

West Virginia racing regulations do not require racetracks to report dog injuries to the Racing Commission. The words "injuries," "injured," "lame" and "euthanize," for example, do not even appear in the 54 pages of racing rules.

Tri-State reviews accidents to ensure they are not related to the surface of the track and makes repairs as necessary, but it maintains no permanent record of that activity, either, Adkins said Friday. Though injuries do happen, he calls them "extremely rare."

"It's just like any other athletic sport. These are professional athletes, and when they're out there on the track, injuries can happen," Adkins said.

"We have 360 performances, 15 races in each performance and eight dogs in each race. That's 43,200 dogs in a year's time that are on our track," he said.

Last year, 549 dogs were injured, or only 1.27 percent of the total, Adkins said. Thirty dogs were euthanized.

Of the total injuries, 456 were track- or race-related, Adkins said. The other 100 included everything from illness and tendon injuries to broken toenails.

"The safe handling of these dogs is very, very important," he said. "It's something we don't take lightly."

The flip side of the injury rate, Adkins said, is that "these dogs are treated like professional athletes."

They're housed well, they're fed well, they're trained, and there's an enormous effort ... at the end of their careers to make sure these dogs are placed in good homes."

Theil could not say why the injury rate at Wheeling Island appears to be higher than at other, comparably sized tracks.

GREY2K's analysis shows:

—707 injuries total, 325 of which involved broken bones or dislocations, and 28 of which were skull fractures or spinal injuries;

—62 deaths or euthanizations, including one dog that suffered head trauma and seizures when it was hit by a mechanical lure in July 2009;

—576 greyhounds were unable to race because they were too ill.

"Greyhound racing is cruel and inhumane and should end," Theil said. "Dogs play an important role in our lives, and deserve to be protected from individuals and industries that would do them harm. It is our hope that state lawmakers will start to look at this industry and ask questions."

Jeff Kessler, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said Friday this is the first time the issue has come to his attention. Kessler said he wants to investigate the matter further before deciding if there's any role for the Legislature.

In particular, the Marshall County Democrat wants to know what other states do in terms of requiring injury reports.

GREY2K says the laws vary from state to state. Florida, where Tri-State's parent company operates another greyhound track, does not require injuries to be reported, but Adkins said his company tracks them voluntarily there, too.

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Associated Press Writer Tom Breen in Charleston contributed to this report.

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On the Net:

GREY2K: www.GREY2KUSA.org

Wheeling Island: <http://www.wheelingisland.com/Greyhound-Racing.aspx>