

Bill could shut down NH greyhound tracks

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Six lawmakers and a nationwide nonprofit group want to shut down New Hampshire's greyhound racing industry by 2009, citing poor kennel conditions and more than 100 serious or life-ending injuries in the past two years at the state's three tracks.

The "Dog Protection Act" sponsored by Rep. Peter Schmidt, D-Dover, Sen. Sheila Roberge, R-Bedford, and four other lawmakers would effectively force the closure of Seabrook Greyhound, Hinsdale Raceway and The Lodge at Belmont (formerly Lakes Region Greyhound Park).

Proponents say they have collected what they consider shocking photographs of kennel conditions at the state tracks from the state Pari-Mutuel Commission and have compiled injury reports filed at the commission.

They say reports for 2005 and 2006 show 716 injuries with 22 percent, or 157, deemed "career or life-ending."

A key industry leader accused the Massachusetts-based nonprofit Grey2KUSA, which is promoting the bill on its Web site, of twisting statistics and other materials to suit its animal rights agenda.

"This is our livelihood and the livelihood of over 100 employees, and we will certainly fight this," said Joseph Sullivan, Hinsdale Raceway president.

He said his track runs 15 races a day, 52 weeks a year with at least eight dogs per race.

"We're talking about 11,000 or 12,000 dogs racing here over the course of a year and if you take the number of injuries reported, that's a small percentage," he said.

Editor's note: Sullivan today clarified the preceding statement. He said the state's tracks have have 500 to 1,000 dogs apiece, with each dog racing every few days. He said Hinsdale holds 15 daily races year-round, with at least eight dogs in each race, adding up to 11,000 to 12,000 race "starts" annually, Sullivan said. The track's injury rate is three per 1,000 starts, he said.

Schmidt and other proponents interviewed yesterday said they have no "philosophical objection" to having greyhounds race. They said the problem is how the dogs are treated by the industry.

"It's the idea that man's best friend is being exploited, used up and then thrown away," said Schmidt. "They are kept in conditions which I think are inhumane, all on behalf of an industry that is not really viable except in conjunction with the

gambling aspect of it."

Commission records show that live greyhound racing is a small and declining percentage of the amount bet in the state's greyhound racing industry. But tracks are required to hold live racing at least 50 days in order to simulcast racing events from other states, which is their primary money-maker. If live racing is banned, the tracks would, in effect, be unable to simulcast and would presumably go out of business.

A draft of the bill makes it a class A misdemeanor to "keep, breed, transport, or train any dog with the intent that it or its offspring shall be engaged or used in commercial dog racing, or shall establish or promote a commercial dog race or meet." It also sets up a study committee to recommend ways to mitigate the negative economic impact in the areas near the three tracks.

Grey2KUSA's stated goal is to pass stronger dog protection laws and shut down existing greyhound tracks across the country. Group executive director Carey Theil said yesterday Vermont and Maine acted to prohibit greyhound racetracks after the existing tracks in those states closed. But, he said, a successful effort in New Hampshire would mark the first time an operating industry is shut down.

Roberge and former Sen. Katie Wheeler, D-Durham, sponsored similar legislation in 2000, but Theil said it was "a non-starter." Proponents say they are now more prepared.

Paul Kelley, Pari-Mutuel Commission executive director, had no comment on the proposed new bill except to say that the commission's job is to enforce policies enacted by the Legislature.

A Web site, www.voteforthedogs.org, has been set up, while a 65 page report listing the injuries and containing more than a dozen pari-mutuel commission photos of track kennels will be sent to all lawmakers soon, Theil said.

Sullivan called the effort "an animal rights agenda that finds any animal use inappropriate. They will use any means they can to advance that argument. There are no inhumane kennels at Hinsdale," which are inspected by the Pari-Mutuel Commission, and, in the case of an adoption kennel, by the state Department of Agriculture.

He said the photographed kennels of his track in the Grey2kUSA report were "found to be totally appropriate" by the commission.

The bill's co-sponsors are Sen. Deborah Reynolds, D-Plymouth, and Reps. Mary Cooney, D-Plymouth, Elenore Casey Crane, R-Nashua, James Splaine, D-Portsmouth.