



November 25, 2012

Iowa greyhounds injured at tracks, advocates report

By William Petroski

Greyhounds sustained a total of 175 injuries while racing at Iowa's tracks between January 2011 and July 2012, says a national greyhound protection organization.

Twenty-four greyhounds were euthanized, the organization reported.

Broken legs were the most common reported injury over the 19-month stretch at the two tracks in Council Bluffs and Dubuque. Other common injuries were sprains, tears and other broken bones, although several dogs suffered more severe injuries, including a fractured skull and a broken neck.

The report was compiled from state of Iowa records by Grey2K USA, based in Somerville, Mass., the largest greyhound protection organization in the country. The research found that the Council Bluffs track, which has races year-round, had 106 dog injuries, while the Dubuque track, which offers races between April and October, had 69 injuries.

Carey Theil, the advocacy group's executive director, contends that the data are more evidence that the Legislature should act to effectively end greyhound racing in Iowa.

Eleven states have banned commercial dog racing since 1993, and Iowa is one of only seven states where greyhound tracks still operate.

But lawmakers have rejected proposals the past three years to allow casinos to pay millions of dollars annually to the state treasury for the right to shut down their dog tracks. Since the mid-1990s, Iowa law has allowed the Dubuque and Council Bluffs tracks to operate casinos, but only on the condition that casino profits subsidize dog racing, even though wagering on races has dwindled and crowds are sparse.

"These injuries are a consequence of legislative inaction," Theil said. "There isn't going to be a miraculous revival of greyhound racing. The only question left is how many dogs will suffer serious injuries and die before lawmakers act."

People who work in Iowa's greyhound industry say dog racing provides more than 1,200 jobs in Iowa and generates \$26.7 million annually in Iowa income.

They also point out that because Iowa's dog tracks conduct thousands of races annually, the odds of a dog being injured during a typical dog race is only a fraction of 1 percent. In fact, said Jim Quilty, a lawyer for the Iowa Greyhound Association, the injury rate for Iowa greyhounds is significantly lower than for high school athletes, who are injured at a rate of 2.4 injuries per 1,000 participants. He cites the high school statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Beverly Yates of Underwood, whose family has raised greyhounds since about 1984, said one key fact missing from the Grey2K report is that many dogs that break their legs or suffer other injuries eventually return to racing after receiving care from a veterinarian. She said dog owners have significant investments in their greyhounds and want them to remain in good health.

"This industry is providing a lot of good-paying jobs," Yates said. "People are raising families with these jobs. I have raised four children, and they have all gone through college. It is just a livelihood for a lot of people. This is just what we do."

There are no national statistics on the number of greyhounds injured each year while racing because many states do not keep adequate records, according to Grey2K USA. However, based on available records, it is likely that thousands of greyhounds are seriously injured, the organization contends. It notes that in 2002, 172 greyhounds were injured in Massachusetts, which banned dog racing in 2010, and one track in Wisconsin had 412 greyhound injuries in a single year. No dog tracks currently operate in Wisconsin.

Iowa's greyhound tracks are regulated by the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission, which has a full-time state veterinarian and other state employees assigned to each of the tracks in Dubuque and Council Bluffs.

Brian Ohorilko, the commission's administrator, said he hadn't seen the Grey2K report, but he added he monitors track veterinarian reports and he hasn't noticed any significant increase or decrease in greyhound injuries.

"We take the welfare of the animals very seriously in both dog and horse racing," Ohorilko said. State veterinarians perform a pre-race exam to ensure that dogs are healthy for racing, and tracks are checked to make sure they are in good condition, which helps avert injuries, he said.
