

Wheeling Island casino halts racing to rebuild dog track

VICKI SMITH • Associated Press Writer • August 25, 2010

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) -- A spike in greyhound injuries since May has halted live racing at Wheeling Island Hotel-Casino-Racetrack, where officials said Wednesday they plan a track overhaul that could cost as much as \$400,000.

President and General Manager Jim Simms did not provide the exact number of injuries but said the trend began over the winter, when the Northern Panhandle track was hit by heavy snow. The injury rate normalized in the spring, then began climbing again in May.

"It was approaching double the normal level," Simms said. "That was kind of an alarm bell."

Track managers tried various tactics to make the track safer, adjusting such things as sloping, soil composition, and watering and soil-scraping practices. When those measures failed, Wheeling Island brought in a former racing director, company experts and industry consultants to review the situation, he said.

The consensus was for what he called "a substantial overhaul."

The reconstruction will cost more than \$250,000 and as much as \$400,000, Simms said. Wheeling Island will also lose money on live racing during the renovations.

Crews began applying a binding agent to the surface as a temporary fix on Wednesday, and live racing will resume Friday. On Sept. 7, the track will shut down for a comprehensive overhaul.

Simulcast wagering won't be affected.

The track was built in 1976 and last refurbished in the late 1980s. Over the years, it's taken a beating not only from tens of thousands of races but also from harsh winters and the periodic flooding of the Ohio River.

"Our position on this was, if we're going to fix it, we're going to do it right," Simms said. "This is a hit for us. It's definitely an impact. But not everything is

about money. ... The safety of the dogs is paramount to us."

Earlier this year, a national group determined to outlaw greyhound racing issued a report about deaths and injuries at Wheeling Island. GREY2K USA, a Massachusetts group that helped outlaw racing last year in that state, said Wheeling Island Hotel-Casino-Racetrack's injury rate was the highest of any track it had reviewed.

Between January 2008 and September 2009, 62 dogs died or had to be euthanized, it said, while more than 700 were injured.

"This is a chronic problem that has continued over an extended period of time," said Carey Theil, GREY2K's executive director, said Wednesday. "Even though Wheeling Island is now doing the right thing, it should have acted much sooner. Unfortunately, countless greyhounds have paid the price for the track's inaction to this point."

Wheeling Island runs at least 134 races a week, each with eight dogs.

Simms said the track will create and contribute to a fund for rehabilitating injured dogs next year. An owner who wants an injured dog to race again would cover the rehabilitation expense on their own. The fund would help those who want the dog treated, then put up for adoption, he said.

Wheeling Island will contribute \$500-\$1,000 per dog, Simms said.

Wheeling Island, which serves more than 2.5 million

gamblers a year, is owned by Delaware North Companies Inc. Its casino features 43 table games, a 20-table poker room and 2,000 slot machines.