



Greyhound live baiting: Internal documents reveal cover-ups, tip-offs and mismanagement inside NSW racing regulator

By Caro Meldrum-Hanna and the National Reporting Team's Sam Clark

Posted Sun 30 Aug 2015, 4:02pm

Internal documents have revealed senior greyhound racing administrators in New South Wales were actively strategising to downplay live baiting in the industry in the days before a Four Corners program exposing the scandal was set to air.

In February, Four Corners exposed widespread and extreme animal cruelty and cheating through the use of live animals to entice and train greyhounds.

The practice, known as live baiting, has been banned for decades and is also a criminal offence in Australia.

State regulator Greyhound Racing NSW (GRNSW) had repeatedly failed to detect and stamp out the barbaric conduct of many in its ranks.

The internal emails, obtained by the ABC under Freedom of Information laws, revealed then-GRNSW chief executive Brent Hogan was strategising with staffers several days before the Four Corners program was due to air, discussing how to spin the live baiting scandal and win over the NSW Government.

On Friday February 13, Mr Hogan wrote about how he had been "spit-balling" options, stating: "We [GRNSW] are in a position where politically we need to be seen to be doing something of significance and independently."

In one private email exchange, Mr Hogan listed options about how the regulator could respond to the pending scandal, including the establishment of what appears to be a bogus taskforce:

"Appoint a panel headed by a prominent QC ... a technical expert (f*** knows who this is but must be independent of us, like a head of a vet school or some dog whisperer with a PhD), and a probity/process advisor ... Will give Government comfort.

"Gives us time to make appointments on Monday (even if all we can say is that the taskforce/commission of review/etc. will be headed up by Big Shot QC."



PHOTO: Documents have revealed Greyhound Racing NSW strategised to downplay allegations of live baiting in the industry. (Supplied: Animals Australia)

MAP: NSW

Key points

- GRNSW chief strategised with staffers to downplay live baiting, internal emails reveal
- Trainers suspected of live baiting "tipped off" by regulator
- Two current GRNSW staff allegedly involved in live baiting
- We always knew this day would come: external strategist

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Friday, 13 February 2015 9:44 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: Response Strategy
Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

Hi All

I spoke with [REDACTED] tonight to spit ball options from a GRNSW perspective:

- Independent review
- Purely focused on training, breaking in and rearing
- Believe we can stand on the findings of the PI with respect to doping, governance, and other matters (pending anything we do not know about)
- Appoint a panel headed by a prominent QC ([REDACTED]), a technical expert (f[REDACTED] knows who this is but must be independent of us, like a head of a vet school or some dog whisper with a PHD), and a probity / process advisor ([REDACTED] does the Government probity work in the main) – will give Government comfort.
- We would need to work up the terms of reference tomorrow (I have asked for the [REDACTED] no response, we can look at the [REDACTED] review as well albeit this will be narrower.

The exchange followed a series of emails sent between unidentified staffers the previous night, discussing how they planned to put a spin on the fallout, deflect scrutiny and privately win over the minister.

"All states need to charm the minister, win over local media, put responses into action, hire new staff, introduce new policies etc," one GRNSW staffer wrote.

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On the evening of the broadcast of the Four Corners episode Making a Killing, GRNSW announced the establishment of an "independent taskforce" to investigate the live baiting claims.

GRNSW had selected QC and former High Court justice Michael McHugh to head their taskforce. Mr McHugh was then appointed by NSW Premier Mike Baird to lead the NSW government's Special Commission of Inquiry into the greyhound racing industry.

Greens MP John Kaye told the ABC the documents gravely and irreversibly undermined the integrity of the current commission of inquiry into greyhound racing.

"Greyhound Racing NSW has set up a show trial," Dr Kaye said.

"It's very clear that what they established was nothing but a public relations exercise. It was never designed to get to the bottom of the story, it was never designed to really disclose the deep-seated problems in the greyhound racing industry."

Dr Kaye said any findings made by the Special Commission of Inquiry should now be questioned.

"This is not about Mr McHugh and his integrity, it's about the credibility of the inquiry process, the intention of his appointment by GRNSW and the failure of the Baird Government to make an appointment that was comprehensively independent of the regulatory body," he said.

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Greens MP John Kaye

The damning private emails written by multiple GRNSW staffers are in stark contrast to the regulator's public assurances made in the days following the Four Corners program, promising it was committed to cleaning up the sport.

NSW Deputy Premier and Racing Minister Troy Grant in a statement rejected the suggestion the inquiry lacked independence.

"There is no evidence to suggest that the Special Commission of Inquiry is anything other than independent and Mr McHugh is the best person to lead the inquiry," Mr Grant said.

"I look forward to Mr McHugh handing down the inquiry's recommendations."

Mr Hogan said any suggestion the taskforce was not genuine was "utterly wrong and offensive".

Trainers suspected of live baiting 'tipped off' by the regulator

The internal documents also revealed GRNSW staffers were involved in thwarting previous attempts by the RSPCA to raid and catch live baiters.

On February 11, the RSPCA raided several properties in NSW without giving prior notice to the regulator, attracting the ire of staffers working inside GRNSW.

"Hard to trust [the RSPCA] again now. They have burnt us bad," one staffer wrote after discovering the RSPCA had raided properties without informing GRNSW.

On 11 Feb 2015, at 8:20 pm, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] wrote:

Hard to trust them again now. They have burnt us bad.

They may say "it was not our operation but when we were informed about the issues we were obliged to act".

I reckon that is the line they will use.

Sent from my iPhone

On Feb 11, 2015, at 8:26 PM, [REDACTED] wrote:

Problem was that last time we had a joint raid of a trial track, the Intel was good. Only problem our participants were tipped off. Trust is a two way street.

Waiting for a call from [REDACTED] he has text that will call.

Six minutes later, a second staff member responded, revealing the RSPCA had good reason to withhold information from the regulator and act alone, keeping GRNSW in the dark about plans to raid tracks:

"Problem was that last time we [GRNSW and RSPCA] had a joint raid of a trial track, the Intel was good. Only problem [was] our participants were tipped off. Trust is a two-way street."

RSPCA NSW chief executive Steve Coleman said he was appalled by the revelations.

"It's completely unacceptable and disappointing," Mr Coleman said.

"It flies in the face of the very term 'integrity', if people are being forewarned about the onset of an inquiry or an investigation by the RSPCA."

Mr Coleman said he would be investigating the source of the apparent leak from within GRNSW and asking questions of the regulator.

In another internal email exchange, one unidentified staffer told then-GRNSW chief executive Mr Hogan that any future effort to increase the powers of racing stewards and stamp out live baiting would be pointless.

"A man's home is his castle and I can imagine a lot of rabbit shit in laundries from now on," the staffer wrote.

Two current GRNSW staff allegedly involved in live baiting

Internal emails obtained by the ABC under FOI also reveal the regulator is aware of claims a GRNSW steward and an Integrity Officer have attended at least one NSW property to personally engage in live baiting themselves.

In an email exchange marked "strictly confidential" dated February 27, a GRNSW welfare officer formally reported to management the details of a private conversation held with one of the greyhound trainers exposed by Four Corners.

The conversation occurred during a welfare check of the trainer's animals:

"[The trainer] stated he only ever did what owners asked him to do to train their dogs, saying that live baiting has been common from the small hobbist [sic] trainer through to the 'big' wealthy owners."

"[The trainer] then commented that a 'steward used to do it not that long ago, I don't understand how one minute he can be live baiting, the next he is on the other side of the fence'.

"[I] asked him to confirm if it was a GRNSW steward that he was alleging to have been live baiting.

"[He] said 'Yes' and that there was another.

"I asked 'another steward?' And [he] replied, 'No, another one of you lot though'."

Emails sent later that day record GRNSW staffers being asked by management not to disclose the allegations and to keep the information "discreet".

The ABC has discovered the identity of the steward allegedly involved in live baiting. The steward is a former greyhound trainer whose family members are still actively training and racing dogs.

When the ABC informed GRNSW of the identity of the steward, the regulator responded by confirming an internal investigation was unsuccessful because the original informant had refused to provide more details.

But in a written statement sent to the ABC last week, GRNSW said it had "now completed [the] investigation, concluding that there is no specific evidence linking any GRNSW staff member to live-baiting practices".

A spokesperson for GRNSW said the regulator was in the process of meeting with all of its staff who had been involved with greyhounds to ensure they had never participated in live baiting.

"If as part of that process, GRNSW identifies that any GRNSW staff have been involved in live baiting practices, GRNSW will take appropriate action," the spokesman said.

'We always knew this day would come'

In another email exchange, staffers revealed they had hired an external strategist with a background in the racing industry to help manage the damage.

-----Original Message-----

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, 12 February 2015 10:17 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: Thinking...

[REDACTED] is in. Can come to ours early afternoon tomorrow to discuss a game plan, timeline, pre-emptive (very keen on the latter).

Will then help out on Saturday and Sunday at the office.

His first line: "We always knew this day would come."

Finished off with: "We'll be right, we'll get through this."

"[The strategist's] first line was: 'We always knew this day would come'," an unnamed staff member wrote.

"[The strategist] finished off with: 'We'll be right, we'll get through this.'"

GRNSW chief executive Mr Hogan responded: "Ah, putting the old band back together, is he bringing the angels?"

The Greens' Dr Kaye said the identity of the strategist must be made public.

"It's extraordinary that inside GRNSW and people close to the industry knew that live baiting would sooner or later be exposed," he said.

"That means, as we've always expected, that live baiting was well known in the industry. That puts paid to the statements by GRNSW that they were shocked when it was exposed and their statement before it was exposed that it was not happening."

The emails also revealed GRNSW officials were expecting the Four Corners program to contain damaging footage, but they were uncertain of its exact nature.

One email exchange confirmed GRNSW was aware of shocking footage showing greyhounds racing drunk on alcohol.

"Me thinks drunk dogs will get a run," one staffer speculated.

Another responded: "They wouldn't have the footage, but we should be prepared for that."

The emails call into question the regulator's assurances that the sport did not tolerate animal cruelty and had made "tremendous progress" stamping out abusive practices.

The Special Commission of Inquiry is due to report to the NSW Government by the end of September.

More on this story:

- Piglets, possums and rabbits used as live bait in secret greyhound training sessions
- Greyhound Racing NSW suspends 28 dogs over live baiting allegations
- Top NSW trainer and owner confirm star dogs broken in by live baiter Zeke Kadir
- Former top greyhound racing official Bob Smith identified in footage aired by Four Corners

Topics: law-crime-and-justice, corruption, racing, animal-welfare, nsw

Contact Sam Clark