

THE DAILY NONPAREIL

Bluffs Run greyhounds test positive for possible performance-enhancing drug



Photo: Jessica Reilly

In this May 16, 2015 photo, Greyhounds exit the gate during opening day of racing at The Iowa Greyhound Park in Dubuque, Iowa. Scientists will study whether the death of a racing dog at an Iowa greyhound track has any link to the use of a risky performance-enhancing drug found in other animals from the same kennel, a regulator said Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015. The dog from the Iowa Greyhound Park died at a veterinarian's office Wednesday night. Regulators obtained custody of the carcass and sent it to a pathology laboratory at Iowa State University for a necropsy, Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission administrator Brian Ohorilko said. (Jessica Reilly/Telegraph Herald via AP)

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By Mike Brownlee / mbrownlee@nonpareilonline.com

Two greyhounds that compete at Bluffs Run Greyhound Park have tested positive for a potential performance-enhancing drug.

Officials with the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission confirmed Thursday that two canines tested positive for ractopamine, a drug usually administered to livestock that can increase muscle mass, open airways for oxygenation and decrease fat.

“There’s no reason for it to be in a greyhound,” said Brian J. Ohorilko, administrator with the commission.

Random pre-race drug tests are routine, he said.

The positive tests come on the heels of failed tests by 12 greyhounds at Iowa Greyhound Park in Dubuque.

Another dog died last Wednesday, according to Jeff Lamberti, chair of the commission.

“It’s not confirmed the drug was the cause of the death; the folks at (Iowa State University) are trying to determine that,” he said.

The Iowa State diagnostic lab found the drug in dry food given to the dogs in Dubuque. Ohorilko said results from a test of dry food from Council Bluffs has not been completed.

Lamberti said after the positive tests of Council Bluffs dogs, “the first thing we worry about is the health and safety of the animals.”

“We want to make sure they’re healthy,” he said.

The greyhounds were pulled from racing, placed in quarantine and are undergoing tests on the affects of the drug.

Ohorilko and Lamberti explained that when administered in small doses over a large amount of time, ractopamine could act as a performance enhancer.

“There could be performance-enhancing attributes to it. We don’t know for sure,” Ohorilko said.

However, when administered in large doses over a short amount of time, the drug can be harmful. Ohorilko said ractopamine can damage heart tissue in greyhounds.

An investigation by the commission and stewards with Bluffs Run continues. Ohorilko said no racing teams or trainers have been suspended at this time.

“If it’s a food contamination, that’s a whole different matter than being administered by trainers. We have to wait and see what’s going on,” Lamberti said. “We haven’t ruled anything out at this point.”

Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA, a nonprofit organization that works “to end the cruelty of dog racing,” called ractopamine, “a serious drug.”

“This is a serious case that the state needs to handle aggressively,” he said. “It’s troubling, not only for animal welfare but also for the integrity of the wagers being placed.”

In Dubuque, nine of the positive greyhounds were from Stidham Racing LLC, owned by Jon Stidham of McClelland, while the other three were from Robert Hardison Kennel, owned by Bob Hardison of Onawa.

In the wake of the positive tests, both kennels are not allowed to enter dogs into races at Iowa Greyhound Park pending an investigation.

Meanwhile, trainers Alicia Bushey, of Dubuque, and Jessica Hughes, of Bellevue, Iowa, have been suspended, pending a hearing on their appeals.

Jerry Crawford, an attorney for the Iowa Greyhound Association, which operates the Dubuque track, said all “evidence points to no wrongdoing” by any kennel employee.

He said he believes the employees did not know the drug was in the dog food.

In May of 2014, Gov. Terry Branstad signed a bill that will end greyhound racing in Council Bluffs.

The bill allows Horseshoe Casino to end dog racing at Bluffs Run on Dec. 31, 2015.

Horseshoe's owners will pay the greyhound industry \$65 million; the initial payment of nearly \$9.3 million would be due Jan. 1, 2016.

The final races at Bluffs Run are scheduled for December, after which Dubuque will be the final city in the state with greyhound racing.

– The Associated Press contributed to this story.