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Greyhound racing report disputes industry viability

by Dave Boucher
Daily Mail Capitol Reporter

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- A group advocating for the end of greyhound racing believes a newly created report clearly shows the industry faces tough economic prospects, receives substantial state funding and doesn't adequately consider animal safety.

Racing supporters say the group is skewing information. They argue the racing industry is still viable, the state needs to abide by its promises and the companies that own the racing-casino-hotel establishments need to upgrade facilities.

Since 2008, the state has provided more than \$41 million to West Virginia greyhound breeders through the Greyhound Breeding Development Fund, according to a report released today by Massachusetts-based nonprofit Grey2K USA.

"The state is investing in an industry that has passed," said Christine Dorchak, Grey2K president. "And we want to point out that this is not only a misuse of taxpayer money, it's also causing great harm to greyhounds."

The group received the information about the development fund through a Freedom of Information Act request sent to the state Racing Commission. The commission accounts for much of the information in the report, which also includes data from racetracks themselves or media reports.

The report was partially funded by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

There are two "racinos"— facilities with greyhound racetracks and casinos — in the state: Mardi Gras racetrack in Nitro and Wheeling Island Racetrack and Casino in Wheeling.

State law says the sites cannot have slot machines, table games or other gambling endeavors without a racetrack.

Between the two, money gambled on live racing declined 37 percent from 2008 to 2012, according to the report.

"These tracks have essentially become casinos that happen to have dogs running around in circles with no one betting on the dogs," Grey2K Executive Director Carey Thiel said.

That information doesn't tell the whole story, argued kennel owner and greyhound breeder Dean Miner, an outspoken critic of Grey2K. He pointed to people betting online, using mobile devices or at off-track sites nationwide.

The amount of "handle"— funds wagered on racing — on live racing has gone down since 2009, but the total handle has gone up.

In 2008, the total amount wagered on greyhound racing was \$94.8 million, according to state

racing commission records. In 2012, the total was \$110.7 million.

Including horse racing, the total amount wagered on racing in West Virginia has more than doubled since 1993: almost \$613 million in 2012 and \$250 million in 1993.

By comparison, the amount of that money that goes to the state has dropped from \$7.45 million to \$2.13 million, according to Racing Commission data.

Miner, who lives in the Wheeling area, thinks live betting would increase if racino owners invested more in the facilities.

"We go over to watch the racing in a pigsty," Miner said.

Sam Burdette, president of the West Virginia Greyhound Owners and Breeders Association, agreed the tracks need attention.

He alleged that Mardi Gras has stopped doing marketing for the races, obstructed the view of where the dogs start the race and made it so people can only sit outside if they want to watch a race.

During the last legislative session, lobbyists for the racinos argued the state should allow the racinos to cut back on and reduce fees for table games. They pointed to smaller profit margins and more out-of-state competition.

The Legislature discussed the measure but eventually took no action. After threatening to get rid of table games if the fee did not change, Wheeling Island eventually renewed its license.

"In my humble opinion, they have constructed or rearranged it so that there are obstacles to people wanting to attend the dog races," Burdette said.

A representative at Mardi Gras did not return a phone message.

Burdette and Miner agree the industry faces challenges, and the money provided from the tracks is a fraction of the overall gambling revenue.

Miner received more than \$200,000 in 2012 from the state fund but said he still lost money.

The revenue earned from table games or slot machines would never have been possible without the tracks, the breeders say, pointing to changes in state law that allowed such gambling. They want racino owners to abide by their promises and continue to support greyhound racing.

Osi Imomoh, named president and general manager at Wheeling Island in the spring, said he supports greyhound racing. He said it helps make the racino unique.

"Overall, is it a profitable part of our business? Yes. Is it a tough profit? Yes," Imomoh said.

"Is it a key component of what we do and what makes us special? Yes."

Greyhound racing makes up roughly 10 percent of the business that comes to Wheeling Island, Imomoh said.

He also disputes claims that the racino doesn't want people to come to the track. The resort has a "ways to go" with track improvements, but Imomoh said Wheeling Island spent \$42 million in facility upgrades since 2010. The whole resort is a work in progress, he said.

Wheeling Island employs more than 630 people, and racing helps it keep some of those people employed, Imomoh said. Doing away with it would eliminate jobs associated with the

industry, Burdette argued.

Thiel and Dorchak said they sympathize with people who work in the industry. Eliminating it would have a minimal impact on the economy though, they argued, adding that they think the jobs would go away without state funding anyway.

Other states that have ended greyhound racing have also allocated money to people in the racing industry to help them transition to other jobs, Thiel said.

"But to us, our economy shouldn't be built on cruelty to dogs," Thiel said. "We don't understand the argument that you should continue doing something that causes hundreds of dogs to die and thousands of dogs to endure lives of confinement."

Grey2K provides information about greyhound deaths and injuries in its report.

From 2008 to June of this year, 289 greyhounds died or were euthanized at the two tracks, according to the report.

Almost 4,800 injuries were reported in West Virginia from the beginning of 2008 to June of this year, the report states. More than 1,400 greyhounds suffered "career ending" injuries during that period.

There is overlap in the data: a dog could suffer multiple injuries at one time or throughout the year, Thiel said.

Grey2K reached these statistics through analyzing data provided by the tracks and the state racing commission. There are gaps in data provided by the commission and tracks, and the tracks use different reporting methods for some injuries, the report states.

Burdette and Miner said Grey2K unfairly shines a spotlight on these injuries. The chances of a greyhound getting hurt on any given lap around the track are small, Burdette said. There's always a chance for injury in athletic competition, Miner said.

Wheeling Island has a "zero-tolerance policy" for animal cruelty, Imomoh said. He thinks if people saw what happens behind the scenes they might feel differently about greyhound racing.

"At the end of the day, those athletes . . . are valuable and people spend a lot of money raising them, and they want them to be taken care of," Imomoh said.

Racing Commission Executive Director Jon Amores did not return numerous calls seeking comment.

The complete report is available at Grey2Kusa.org.

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