

Greyhound phase-out at Southland underway

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First year of three-year plan will cut 25 percent of live racing.

Late last year, Southland Casino Racing and the Arkansas Greyhound Kennel Association reached an agreement that will eventually phase out live greyhound racing at the popular West Memphis entertainment destination.

The transition, which includes a buyout of the kennel owners' contracts, will take place over a three-year period, which began Jan. 1, 2020.

The agreement, which was unanimously approved by the association and its 16 member kennels, calls for the number of races at Southland to be reduced this year to fewer than 5,000 live races. Southland ran 6,656 live races in 2019. The total number of races scheduled for 2020 is 75 percent of that (4,992 races). The number will be reduced to 3,994 races in 2021 before being reduced once again to just 2,662 races in 2022, with the final live races at the casino, which as Southland Greyhound Park, has been conducting live greyhound racing in West Memphis since opening in 1956, being held on Dec. 31, 2022.

The agreement with the kennels had been contingent on the Arkansas Racing Commission's approval of a Southland petition confirming that under the Arkansas Casino Gaming Amendment of 2018, which was approved by voters in November of that year, Southland is not required to continue conducting live greyhound racing in order to retain its casino license. That provision had been part of the agreement when gaming-style gambling was first approved at Southland and Oaklawn Park in 2006.

"They were already coming after us ... We saw the handwriting on the wall and decided to go ahead and get out in front of them before it became an issue here."

— Robert Thorne, Arkansas Greyhound Kennel Association President, on the decision to phase out greyhound racing.

In its heyday, Southland became one of the most popular greyhound racetracks in the country and one of the leading entertainment destinations in the Mid-South. However, the rise of the Tunica casino market in the early 1990s had a very detrimental effect on the racetrack's revenues.



Further, GREY2K USA has waged a strategic campaign to end dog racing across the U.S., resulting in dozens of tracks being voted out of operation. Most recently, the group successfully lobbied with voters to end dog racing in Florida. Arkansas was likely next.

The kennel association's member contracts with Southland had been set to expire at year's end, prompting discussions on new contracts. Southland and the kennel association discussed the current national climate for live greyhound racing and what that might mean to racing's future in Arkansas.

Greyhound racing in the United States has seen a marked and steady decline and now exists in only six states. It was widely believed among kennel owners and racing officials that the measure would pass if placed before Arkansas voters. "The kennel association and Southland agreed that given these factors we needed an agreement that would provide certainty and clarity for the future by ending live racing via an orderly process and on our own terms," said David Wolf, president and general manager of Southland Casino Racing. "We want to avoid a disruptive and abrupt end to live racing to the benefit of all parties, including everyone who has a job at stake," added Thorne.

Wolf said the gradual phase-out is also a key component of plans to see to the adoption of about 1,200 greyhounds that will be retired from racing once Southland closes down the racing aspect of its operations. Mid-South Greyhound Adoption Option, which works to place retired Southland racing greyhounds in homes, will be working to find homes for the retired racers over the next three years.

"We know it's going to take time to adopt out the greyhounds, and our commitment is to make sure every greyhound that has raced at Southland finds its forever home," Wolf said.