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More greyhounds found dead near suspect's home; trainer's license suspended

November 02, 2010 6:09 PM

[FELICIA KITZMILLER](#) / News Herald Writer

EBRO — Gruesome details are continuing to surface surrounding the deaths of more than 30 dogs at Ebro Greyhound Park.

The Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering issued an order Tuesday for [the emergency suspension](#) of Ponce de Leon trainer Ronnie Williams' license to race and train greyhounds. The Washington County Sheriff's Office has charged Williams with 37 felony counts of cruelty to animals following state investigators' discovery of at least 30 dead greyhounds in his kennel Saturday. Five emaciated dogs were taken from the kennel alive.

Williams is in Washington County Jail facing a \$54,000 bond.

In another development, eight dead dogs, believed to be greyhounds, were found near a bridge on State 20 close to the Walton-Washington County line, just a half-mile from the suspect's home, authorities said.

According to the emergency suspension order, the pari-mutuel wagering division launched an investigation into Williams shortly after he delivered eight underweight dogs with sores to Greyhound Pets of America's Emerald Coast (GPAEC) chapter on Oct. 25. Four days later, investigators entered Williams' kennel at Ebro and discovered 21 dead greyhounds that had "suffered from extreme neglect." Several of the animals were housed two per cage.

The five surviving dogs were rescued from the same kennel. Three of the survivors and one of the dead dogs had duct tape tightly wrapped around their necks, according to the order.

George Kim, a local veterinarian who tended to the five survivors, said four only needed regular feeding to begin their recovery and were given to GPAEC. The one greyhound still under his care is improving, eating and drinking, he said.

"They have been like this for at least a couple of weeks," Kim said.

Five more carcasses were discovered in the freezer of the Building 7 kennels, and one more was found in the freezer of Building 5, where Williams also kept kennels.

Investigators also found six large plastic garbage bags that



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Five kennels occupy the northern part of Ebro Greyhound Park in Washington County. Kennel access is controlled by a high fence and a security guard inside a permanent guardhouse.

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contained remains of an unknown number of animals. Investigators reported the rotting parts could not be safely inspected.

Jennifer Meale, communications director for the Department of Business and Professional Regulation, said an emergency suspension notice and an administrative complaint were served against Williams on Tuesday morning.

Meale said the emergency suspension allows the state to immediately revoke Williams' license and prevent him from practicing his trade pending further action. The administrative complaint provides legal grounds for the permanent revocation of Williams' license in the state of Florida.

Meale declined to comment on the progress of the investigation, including whether charges against Ebro Greyhound Park were possible or if the eight decomposing greyhounds discovered Sunday by Walton County Sheriff's Office near a State 20 bridge were part of the state investigation.

Prior complaints

Williams has had several run-ins with the state's regulating agency in his 17 years as a licensed trainer, records show.

In that time, 15 complaints have been made about him to the Division of Pari-Mutual Wagering; three of the complaints, all dated May 2000, were dismissed, but he has garnered a dozen fines in his career, according to Florida's Department of Business and Professional Regulation website.

A complete description of the complaints was not immediately available Tuesday, but Meale said the agency was working to compile a summary of the allegations and how they were closed. The website does specify three of the complaints were for positive drug tests in his dogs. In November 2002 he was fined when one of his dogs tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs and in May 2005 and August 2007 he was fined when dogs tested positive for nonperformance-enhancing drugs.

Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K, a nonprofit greyhound advocacy organization, questioned why Williams was still allowed to train considering his trouble following the rules, as evidenced by his numerous complaints and fines.

"I think it's shocking that someone who was repeatedly fined for various infractions would continue to be licensed," Theil said.

While the stringency of state regulators across the country varies, Theil said it has been Grey2K's experience that Florida's regulators are effective.

"Ronnie Williams should not have had a license in the first place," Theil said. "They need to examine their practices and determine how this lapse occurred."

None of Williams' prior complaints involved animal neglect, such as food deprivation, insufficient or improper shelter or failure to provide for medical care, and none would have warranted the suspension or revocation of his license under Florida Statute 550.0251(10), which outlines penalties for license violations, Meale said.

"Each case is unique, and the department considers the violations and imposes an appropriate penalty. Past complaint history is considered when imposing penalties," she said.

The Department of Business and Professional Regulation takes the charges of animal cruelty seriously, she added, and said the agency is moving to have him permanently barred from pari-mutuel wagering facilities throughout Florida.

Williams also had been labeled a "troublemaker" by Ebro officials. Assistant General Manager Mark Hess said Williams already had been told his contract to race at Ebro would not be renewed in the spring season, though Hess said the decision did not have to do with mistreatment of his dogs.

More dogs discovered

Investigators are trying to determine whether the bodies of what are thought to be several greyhounds are linked to Williams' ongoing case in Washington County. The decomposing carcasses were found under a bridge off State 20, just inside the Walton County line.

A juvenile found the dogs while riding his ATV on Sunday, according to the Walton County Sheriff's Office incident report. He reported it to animal control, which called the Sheriff's Office. The animal control officer told deputies the dogs appeared to be greyhounds and could be linked to the Washington County case.

Williams lives about a half-mile from where the decomposing dogs were found Sunday, according to the report.

The animal control officer said he counted seven dead dogs; however there may be more, according to

Walton County Sheriff's Office public information officer Mike Morrison. Walton County is coordinating with Washington County on the case, he said.

"Is (Williams) a potential suspect?" Morrison said. "We are exploring that avenue."

Some of the dogs found in Walton County appeared to have a marking tattooed inside of their ears, the report said. The number 26 was visible on one dog's ear and photographed for evidence.

A Fort Walton Beach man who has adopted four retired greyhounds said his dogs have markings tattooed inside their ears; their birth date and racing number, he said.

"We're using the tattoos in the dogs' ears to trace ownership," Haddock said Tuesday morning. "The investigation is under way, and we don't have anything else to report at this time."

Adoption was an option

George said the situation made the rest of a good industry look bad.

"There are many great people involved with the greyhound industry," George said. "We have adopted out literally hundreds of dogs to good homes."

George said Tammy Hess at the greyhound park has taken this program under her wing, and dog adoption organizations participate enthusiastically.

This has been a record year for greyhound adoption, GPAEC board member Roger Spencer said Saturday. Economic strains have caused trainers to give up their dogs en masse. GPAEC alone has placed more than 700 dogs this year and expect to place at least 100 more.

GPAEC had pledged to take every greyhound brought to its doors and Spencer said he had no idea why Williams did not take advantage of that opportunity. GPAEC also provides food to trainers who tell the organization they are in need.

Hess said Ebro has made similar offers to their trainers and he was horrified this happened.