

Issues paper on overbreeding and wastage

Special Commission of Inquiry into the Greyhound Racing Industry in NSW

Submission from the Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 8500 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

Introduction

Greyhound racing has evolved over time from coursing to mechanical lure racing on a circuit tracks. In the period 1960 – 1980 the industry largely consisted of many owners each with a few dogs, with a few professional trainers starting to become prominent. Owners with better dogs sent their dogs to the successful professional trainers. As time progressed smaller trainers continued to exist but their chance of success became lessened as owners and breeders selected their better dogs to be trained by the more professional trainers.

Before 1990 breeding was carried out using natural matings. The bitches were taken to the males for mating. Timing of matings was not precise and so not all bitches conceived at each mating.

In 1990 technology using hormone measurements became available to accurately determine the time of ovulation and so pregnancy rates increased. Concurrently technology to use frozen semen was adopted by the greyhound industry. This meant bitches did not have to be transported to the stud dogs.

Currently a large percentage of all breeding is done by surgical insemination of frozen semen. Stud dog owners have a considerable market for the frozen semen and large amounts of frozen greyhound semen are stored ready for use as needed.

From the later part of the 1990's drug sampling and general integrity in greyhound racing increased to the point where it became difficult to cheat. Gambling turnover increased and so more money became available to distribute as prize money. Most greyhounds are trained on the basis that the trainer trains the dog at no cost or at a low retainer, but receives 50% of the prize money.

As a result of the increased prize money, increased earnings to be made from selling frozen semen, the relative ease of breeding more dogs and the low cost of rearing lots of dogs, there developed a culture of high levels of breeding, selecting the best to train and euthanasing the unwanted ones.

At the same time, there are smaller breeders who breed responsibly and who look after their dogs for life. These people contribute very little to the wastage issue.

National breeding strategy

As part of the national greyhound welfare strategy, national breeding rules were introduced in July 2015.¹ All state jurisdictions have adopted these rules. Greyhound Racing NSW is actively enforcing them.

The new rules involve:

1. The licensing of all breeders. Breeders are to comply with a code of practice.²

¹ Changes in the national breeding rules as part of the national greyhound welfare strategy:
<http://www.thedogs.com.au/Uploads/Consolidated%20National%20and%20Local%20Breeding%20Rules%20Commencing%201%20July%202015%20REVISED.pdf>

² Breeders code of practice,
<http://www.thedogs.com.au/Uploads/150617%20Code%20of%20Practice%20for%20Breeding%20Rearing%20and%20Education.pdf>

2. All dams to be registered with their state racing authority as a breeding female
3. Breeding females over the age of 8 must
 - a. Obtain a veterinary certificate of breeding soundness
 - b. Obtain permission to breed the dog.
4. A maximum of 3 litters can be bred from any one bitch and permission to breed a 4th litter must be obtained from the state racing authority. A certificate of breeding soundness must be obtained before the 4th breeding can occur.
5. No breeding female may have more than 2 litters in any 18 month period
6. All pups have a compulsory C3 (distemper, hepatitis and parvovirus) vaccination at 6-8 weeks and C5 (distemper, hepatitis, parvovirus and two types of canine cough) vaccination at 10-16 weeks
7. All dogs must receive a C5 vaccination before being named and commencing racing.

The licensing of breeders will allow each state racing authority to assess the performance of breeders and as a result will be able to place further limits on the number of litters a breeder may produce.

While this submission provides information specific to NSW and outlines potential plans that may be carried out in NSW, no significant changes can be made to the wastage problem unless breeding is controlled on a national level. The national approach has been adopted by all state racing authorities and the rates of breeding and the number of pups born are reducing as a result of this.

The national approach will prevent breeders moving over state borders to breed more dogs.

As part of the national greyhound welfare strategy national grading rules to clearly define the racing ability of dogs are being developed so as to stop greyhounds moving from stronger racing states to weaker racing states. This movement causes wastage issues in the weaker states.

National licensing project

The national licensing project has been approved by all state racing authorities. It comes into effect on 1 July 2016. Under this project all trainers and breeders will be licensed and there will be a tiered structure for the licences. New and novice trainers and breeders will have limits on the number of dogs they may have in their possession and the number of litters they may train or breed in any one year.

Responses

1. What is the average length of a racing greyhound's career?

Greyhounds may race from 18 months old to 3.5-4.5 years of age. We estimate that the average length of career is 24 months. Greyhounds usually start racing from 18-24 months of age, and they race until retirement.

Retirement occurs due to injury, desire to breed with the dog, a slowing of the dog's race times so that it can no longer find a grade or level of racing suitable for the greyhound to compete in, or the owner's desire to stop racing the dog and look after it as a pet.

In a recent study carried out by Dr Linda Beer³ of 444,046 race starts, in 5102 meetings on 14 different tracks involving 25,240 individual greyhounds, the median age of racing dogs was 2.5 years. Note this is not the mean or average age.

2. What is the average number of starts for a greyhound during its career?

The only published data that exists is from a recent study carried out by Dr Linda Beer.³

The study found that the median number of starts for a single dog was 10 with a range of 1–215. There is no figure for a mean or average number of starts.

Greyhounds Australasia and Greyhound Racing Victoria have recently provided data which shows the average number of starts per dog is approximately 34. Greyhound Racing New Zealand has similar figures.

³ Beer, L. (2015) A study of injuries in Victorian racing greyhounds 2006-2011. Proceedings of the Australian Greyhound Veterinarians Conference Melbourne 2015.

We will estimate 34 as an average number of starts over a 2 year period for the purposes of this submission.

3. What numbers of greyhounds are required to be in training to maintain fields of 8 runners per race each year, for example the meetings held or to be held in New South Wales for the year 2015?

We estimate that in one year if the average number of starts is 17, then 7228 dogs are required.

Greyhound Racing NSW has 33 clubs. Sixteen are TAB clubs which hold 925 meetings each year in total. Non-TAB clubs hold 355 meetings each year, making a total of 1280 meetings each year

We assume an average of 10 races per meeting, with 8 dogs per race, and 20% of the total number of dogs are either injured or being rested at any given time.

1280 meetings X 10 races X 8 starters per race plus 20% of dogs spelled or injured equals 122,880 starters required each year. Assuming the average number of starts is 17, then 7228 dogs are required each year.

4. Would the number of greyhounds required to be in training, as referred to in the preceding paragraph, be reduced by a different grading or programming system? If so, please give specific details about:

a. The grading or programming system that would achieve this purpose;

The number of greyhounds required to be in training is a function of the number of race meetings scheduled. If Greyhound Racing NSW reduced the number of meetings held, the number of dogs required would be lower.

Dogs are graded on their current and past form. Changing grading systems in the short term would not reduce the number of greyhounds required to be in training.

There currently exist a cohort of greyhounds which have a range of abilities which must be allocated to races of similar standards. Wastage becomes an issue with lower graded dogs that do not have races scheduled for them to compete in. Greyhound Racing NSW must provide more races for lower-graded, slower dogs.

b. What reduction in the number of greyhounds would be expected by implementation of such measure(s);

A reduction is not likely to occur with the current cohort of greyhounds, and the current race and grading scheduling. It might be assumed that extending the racing career of greyhounds may reduce euthanasia levels to some extent as these dogs may go on to live in retirement with their owners or trainers.

As part of the national greyhound welfare strategy national grading rules are being developed to ensure that the race performances of all dogs are graded on the same basis. This will stop greyhounds moving from one state where they may have a high grade, to another state where they have a lower grade.

c. Whether the implementation of such measure(s) would involve any financial cost to the greyhound racing industry in New South Wales? If yes, please identify that cost and how such measures could be funded;

If the number of meetings and races per meeting were reduced, gambling returns may be lower, but costs would also be reduced by not running a meeting.

Providing lower grade racing for the current cohort of dogs should be of financial benefit to the industry. Most of these dogs are owned and trained by smaller trainers who generally contribute more to the race day income than larger trainers supplying lots of dogs to any given meeting.

Lower grade races must have a strict limit on the number of dogs trainers can enter for the meeting. It is suggested no more than 4 dogs. If professional trainers are allowed to enter lots of dogs the purpose of this plan will fail.

Gambling turnover would be expected to be less on lower grade racing than on higher grade racing.

d. Whether the implementation of such measure(s) would involve any other consequences for the greyhound racing industry in New South Wales.

More lower grades of racing may divert some prize money away from the faster dogs. It would be beneficial to increase the prize money for this lower grade racing to stimulate the retention of lower grade dogs.

This may cause some unrest with the owners and trainers who have only the faster dogs. Conversely it would be well received by the smaller owners and trainers.

5. Taking into account the number of racing greyhounds required for the purpose of paragraph 3 or 4, what is the minimum number of greyhounds required to be bred each year to maintain those numbers?

Given that 7228 greyhounds are required to fulfill the need for racing, and we estimate the average racing career for a greyhound is two years.

An allowance must be made for dogs which will die due to illness, injury, misadventure or other reasons which make them unsuitable for racing.

In the first 6 weeks of life, we are assuming 10% will die, between 6 weeks and 4 months, we are assuming 2% will die, and from then until naming, we assume 3% will die.

The average NSW litter size is 6.4 pups per litter so the minimum number of greyhounds required to be bred each year in NSW is:

$$\begin{aligned} 7228 \text{ divided by } 2 &= 3614 \\ \text{plus } 15\% &= 4156 \text{ or } 649 \text{ litters per year} \end{aligned}$$

6. Are there any measures which can be taken by participants in the greyhound racing industry, including GRNSW, which will eliminate the “wastage” of healthy greyhounds?

Yes

7. If your answer to paragraph 6 is yes:

a. How would those measures be implemented?

1. The immediate introduction of more races for slower dogs
 - Many participants are content to race their dogs in this level of competition.
 - These races usually attract lower prize money.
 - Prize money for these races must have some financial incentive.
 - Large kennels or trainers that only focus on very fast dogs can pass their dogs on to trainers who will be happy to race these dogs in lower grades.
2. Lower grade races must have a strict limit on the number of dogs any trainer can enter for the meeting. We suggest no more than 4 dogs.
3. An immediate ramping up of adoption programs especially in rural areas.
4. Discussion groups with owners and trainers advising them that they must become part of the wastage solution and adopt more dogs into their own kennels or find homes for them. Owners and trainers must understand why changes are being made.
5. Encouragement of owners and trainers to adopt older dogs.
6. A reduction in breeding to meet the altered demand.
 - Breeders are required obtain a breeder’s licence under national rules.
 - Breeders will be classified based on their breeding history under the new national licensing rules to come into effect 1 July 2016

- The bitch must have a predetermined breeding potential based on her race performance and/or her littermate's race performance.
- The sire must be a proven sire.
 - Any new sire should have a limited number of breedings (suggest 15) for the first 8 months of his stud career then reduce this to 2 per month until some objective data can be gathered on the ability of his pups. This must be done on a national basis.
 - Limited breedings would ensure that new sire semen is only used on bitches that are likely to produce pups suitable for racing.
 - Data should be collated as to the breeding value of existing sires, and estimated breeding values (EBVs) established.

b. Over what period of time can this be achieved?

Introducing this regime should take no longer than 3-6 months. There would need to be industry information nights explaining the new rules and why they are being put in place.

Once this program is in place it will be 14-16 months before the reduction in the number of dogs coming into racing occurs. Pups born under this new regime will be of greater value than they are currently. Owners and rearers will not want to lose any of them. Any loss of pups will no longer be easily replaced and this will improve the overall care of the dogs.

c. What are the potential financial costs involved in respect of such measures?

Costs would be minimal. Greyhound Racing NSW would need to employ staff to administer the scheme.

d. How will the measures which you have identified be funded?

From GRNSW funds.

e. What other consequences, if any, would this have on the greyhound racing industry in New South Wales?

It would financially compromise stud owners who are used to selling significant volumes of semen. It may also reduce income for owners of rearing farms.

As a separate but closely related issue:

- Rearing farms must be registered by Greyhound Racing NSW immediately.
- Rearing farms are the source of a lot of wastage due to lack of care of the dogs and a perception of low value of the dogs
- These farms are domestic animal business and currently some function as "puppy farms".
- A code of practice for rearing farms needs to be established if one does not exist.
- Owners of rearing farms must be accredited by Greyhound Racing NSW and have completed some competency training
- New standards for the rearing of dogs based on the Working Dog Alliance report should be established immediately.
- All dogs must be regularly handled by trained and competent registered and trained animal care workers from 3 weeks of age until they are sent to breaking in facilities.

8. Are there any measures which can be taken by participants in the greyhound racing industry, including GRNSW, which will substantially reduce the "wastage" of healthy greyhounds?

Yes

9. If your answer to paragraph 8 is yes:

a. How would those measures be implemented?

- The immediate introduction of an increased number of lower grade racing
- The reduction of breeding

- Increased adoption rates
- Owner and trainer education, advising them that they must be part of the wastage solution.
- The development of straight track racing which will lower the injury rate.¹
 - Straight track racing would require the development of such a track(s).
 - There is a straight track at Appin which has been decommissioned but which could be quickly brought up to standard and recommissioned.

b. Over what period of time can this be achieved?

Two years

c. What are the potential financial costs involved in respect of such measures?

- Increase in GRNSW staff to implement such changes.
- Capital costs of redeveloping straight track(s).

d. How will the measures which you have identified be funded?

All funding should come from GRNSW.

It is noted that GRNSW does not receive its generated share of gambling turnover. This is due to the intercode agreement which limits its return from gaming to 13% in spite of generating a greater amount. While this is a separate issue it should be part of this discussion.

e. What other consequences, if any, would this have on the greyhound racing industry in New South Wales?

These plans would reduce the influence of large breeders and trainers on the industry and start to return it to an industry in which most of the participants are smaller and will take greater care of their dogs. It should strengthen greyhound racing.

f. By reference to either the percentages and numbers contained in the WDA estimates, or the percentages and numbers contained in the GA estimates, what reduction in “wastage” do you consider to be achievable by the steps which you have identified?

- In any biological population, wastage is a reality. No living population has all the numbers of animals born into it die by “natural causes”. While the concept of zero wastage is an admirable goal it is not achievable.
- It is estimated that by adopting the recommendations in this submission, wastage could be reduced to a very low level within two years.
- As the programs progress they should be monitored and will require modification to continue reducing wastage.
- The modification will be in the areas of:
 - numbers bred
 - numbers of race meetings held
 - progress of adoption programs
 - provision of post-racing activities such as amateur coursing for retired dogs.