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# NTRA nearly ready to launch safety program

By Matt Hegarty

TUCSON, Ariz. - The National Thoroughbred Racing Association is reviewing an annual budget and identifying its certification requirements for a program designed to address public concerns about racehorse and rider safety, the executive chairman of the NTRA said Thursday at the University of Arizona Symposium on Racing in Tucson.

Bob Elliston, the NTRA chairman and the president of Turfway Park, said that the accreditation program had not yet been formally launched because of the amount of work necessary to get it off the ground. The program will likely have a budget of \$800,000 in 2009, Elliston said, and will require racetracks to adopt specific practices in order to be certified as being in compliance. Fifty-five racetracks have pledged to participate in the program.

The NTRA announced the formation of the program in October in response to lingering fallout from the high-profile breakdowns of a number of racehorses over the past three years, culminating with the death of the filly Eight Belles after her second-place finish in the Kentucky Derby this year. Compliance with the program will not be mandatory for racetracks, but NTRA officials have said that they believe that racing fans will avoid betting on uncertified tracks.

"We want to publish individual accreditation awareness and progress, and the betting public will follow that accreditation and vote with their wallets," Elliston said.

Former Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson will conduct periodic reviews of a racetrack's compliance with the recommendations in order to enforce the program's requirements.

Surveys conducted by the NTRA this year have shown that even ardent racing fans are becomingly increasingly sensitive to the issue of fatal breakdowns in racing. The surveys have demonstrated that racing fans' confidence in the sport overall has dropped 12 to 13 points this year, according to the officials who conducted the surveys, who called the drops the most dramatic they have seen in the five years of conducting the surveys.

Elliston said that the NTRA is still developing a list of the requirements and that the organization was not ready to announce any of the recommendations. He said that the requirements will fall into five areas: medication and testing, injury reporting and prevention, safety research, producing safer racing environments, and the care of retired horses. The requirements for certification will not be announced en masse, Elliston said.

"You can't have everything happen overnight," said Elliston. "The alliance will be a living, breathing entity that will continue to add recommendations as they come about."

The Thursday afternoon panels at the symposium focused exclusively on efforts by the racing industry to improve the safety of racehorses.

In a panel examining the industry's efforts to track injuries, Dr. Rick Arthur, the equine medical director for the California Horse Racing Board, said that the board is considering whether to release statistics tracking the number of racing fatalities by trainer. The effort is expected to be highly contentious because of the potential to shine a harsh spotlight on specific trainers, but Arthur said he expected the board to approve the publication of the figures.

Arthur displayed a chart during the panel with the trainers' names omitted that showed that one trainer had 15 horses die under his care in the 2007 fiscal year. Arthur also said that another trainer had four fatal

breakdowns from 96 starts, for a rate of 40 per 1,000 starts. The national rate is approximately 2 fatalities per 1,000 starts.

"I don't know where [the board] is going to go with it," Arthur said. "In my opinion it's public data. Very likely we will go forward and publish that data."

Arthur also took issue with a statement earlier in the week made by Charles Hayward, the chief executive officer of the New York Racing Association, that artificial surfaces may lead to a greater increase in soft-tissue injuries. A study conducted earlier this year in California showed that soft-tissue injuries have remained static since the state's racetracks switched to artificial surfaces in 2007, Arthur said, while musculoskeletal injuries - and fatalities - have declined.

## **Clash over bet monitoring**

Officials of racetracks and companies seeking contracts to monitor the bet-processing system clashed at a panel earlier Thursday that focused on how to ensure the integrity of wagering.

The dispute, which has been simmering for several years, spilled out into the open at the Thursday panel when Chris Scherf, executive vice president of the racetrack trade group Thoroughbred Racing Associations, questioned the need for a monitoring system developed by a company called AMS. The founder of AMS, Isidore Sobkowski - a former wagering-security consultant to the National Thoroughbred Racing Association - had earlier outlined the benefits of his bet-monitoring system on the panel.

The TRA owns its own investigative company, the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau, that monitors the wagering at all of the TRA's 40-plus member tracks. But the system used by the TRPB has not been approved as an "independent" monitoring system by the Association of Racing Commissioners International because it is owned by tracks, making it unqualified for use under an RCI model rule that the association has been pushing states to adopt.

The model rule has already been adopted in New York, which will require the independent monitoring of all wagers on New York races as of Jan. 1. Under the rule, only one company - AMS - would qualify to run the monitoring system. California regulators also have said they are considering adopting the RCI model rule.

In public comments following the panel presentations, Scherf said the lack of any qualified competitor gave AMS enormous pricing power over the racing industry. He also criticized Sobkowski for "overpromising" the effectiveness of the monitoring system that he has developed for AMS and said that the TRPB system was operating as well as any other monitoring system.

Sobkowski disputed that AMS was looking to gouge the racing industry for its services.

"We're looking for an industry solution here," Sobkowski said. "We're not looking for an industry advantage."

The integrity of the racing industry's bet-processing system has been a significant topic of concern since the 2002 Breeders' Cup, when an employee of the bet-processing company Autotote rigged a pick-six ticket. Since then, several other incidents have confirmed bettors' suspicions that it is possible to bet after a race has already started, though in rare instances. In addition, Autotote - which has been renamed Scientific Games Racing - was at the center of a scandal last year in which its Quick Pick racing terminals in California failed for a year to include the last entrant in any race on a computer-generated ticket.

Many regulatory agencies have embraced the idea of requiring racetracks to pay for an independent monitoring system. Ed Martin, the president of the RCI, said in response to the criticism that racetracks needed to accept that the public would be better served if an outside company was responsible for monitoring.

"This is not the TRA versus regulators," Martin said. "We have a common goal. But the regulators at the end of the day have a responsibility to the public."

