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Panel Studying Synthetic Surfaces

By Matt Hegarty

LEXINGTON, Ky. - A racing committee overseen by the Jockey Club has begun collecting data on the maintenance of synthetic racing surfaces in an attempt to offer guidance to tracks on how best to groom and care for them, members of the committee said Thursday.

The data, collected daily during the recent Del Mar meeting in Southern California, included the size and type of equipment used to groom the track, as well as the depth the equipment reached into the surface and the speed of the equipment over the track. Officials at the track also collected daily data on the temperature and moisture content of the track, data on the resiliency of the track using a specialized tool called the Clegg Hammer, and workout and race times.

Mick Peterson, a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Maine who is a member of the committee collecting the data, said on Thursday morning that the committee hoped to use the data to develop a large study on the most effective ways to maintain an artificial surface, including when to re-coat the materials with wax and what maintenance techniques to use when temperatures change.

Since Turfway Park installed the first U.S. racetrack synthetic surface late in 2005, eight other racetracks have installed or are in the process of installing one: Del Mar, Keeneland, Santa Anita Park, Hollywood Park, Woodbine, Golden Gate Fields, Arlington Park, and Presque Isle Downs. While initial data has shown that catastrophic injuries have declined on the surfaces, many tracks have experienced maintenance problems or been the target of criticism, including Del Mar, where some horsemen complained that the track was looser in the afternoon than in the morning.

Three manufacturers have installed synthetic surfaces at racetracks in the United States - Polytrack, Cushion Track, and Tapeta Footings - and though all use roughly the same ingredients, the surfaces differ in some respects. Peterson said that the manufacturers have all indicated that they would cooperate with efforts to gather the data for future study, and that his study would not focus on the differences between the surfaces, but the similarities.

Peterson provided his comments during a meeting arranged for reporters by the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation at the organization's offices in Lexington