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Northern Idaho police investigating instant racing legality

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Northern Idaho police have launched a criminal investigation probing the legality of slot-like machines known as instant horse racing terminals, which are slowly gaining popularity across the state.

Post Falls Police Chief Scot Haug says detectives are responding to a complaint claiming that the roughly 10 terminals installed at Greyhound Park and Event Center are illegal slot machines and not state-approved pari-mutuel betting terminals, in which gamblers bet against each.

"It is our job to look at if these machines are legal," Haug said. "If they are, then that's what our report will say."

Instant racing was legalized in Idaho in 2013 after horse industry representatives argued they needed them to save their dying trade. However, the legality of the machines has been questioned by several states and some disputes are still awaiting a final decision in court. Most recently, four Idaho tribes demanded state officials cease all use of the machines, coming just short of threatening a lawsuit.

The instant horse racing machines resemble slot machines, with animations and music. Bettors are wagering on past races, but the horse names are unknown before they place their bets. The machines only show the last few seconds of the race, and payouts are instant. Racing officials say gamblers aren't betting against the house, but a pool of other gamblers.

Haug said that he expects to complete the investigation in about a month. Once finished, Haug added that he wants to submit the findings to the Idaho Attorney's General office for an opinion.

"I think this has a statewide impact," he said. "They are already in Ada County and in Idaho Falls."

The attorney general's office was not available for comment Monday because of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

Besides Idaho, instant racing is legal in Kentucky, Alabama, Oregon and Wyoming.

The Wyoming Supreme Court in 2003 ruled that instant racing was illegal, ruling "we are dealing with a slot machine that attempts to mimic traditional

pari-mutuel wagering. Although it may be a good try, we are not so easily beguiled."

In the same year, Oregon also outlawed instant racing. By 2013, both state legislatures had approved reinstating the machines.

Haug said that detectives are working with Frank Lamb, executive director of the Idaho Horse Racing Commission. Lamb was the former Wyoming Pari-Mutuel Commission in 2003 when the state's high court struck down instant horse racing.

Lamb did not respond to phone calls from The Associated Press Monday.

Three out of nine racetracks in Idaho have instant racing. Les Bois Park, just outside of Boise, has the most machines after spending \$2 million to install 200 terminals last year. A handful of racing terminals opened in downtown Idaho Falls, not directly on-site of the racetrack thanks to a loophole in Idaho law that allows off-site pari-mutuel betting to attract more customers.

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