

Idaho governor calls for return of instant racing terminals

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter says he wants to see lucrative betting machines known as instant horse racing terminals reinstated in Idaho, with tighter regulations.

The Idaho Supreme Court ruled earlier this year that the betting machines are illegal because Otter's veto of legislation banning them wasn't returned to lawmakers on time. In Idaho, bills automatically become law unless they're vetoed and returned to the Statehouse within the legal time frame.

In a statement released Wednesday, Otter said that he vetoed the legislation to avoid the demise of the horse-racing industry. Otter added that he would not turn his back on the horse industry in light of the court's ruling.

"Let's start with the steps I laid out in my veto message last winter: creation of a State gaming commission to set operating rules that are sensitive to community and industry concerns, restoration of horse racing services — including pari-mutuel terminals — but with tighter regulations on the location of the machines and operations," Otter wrote.

Instant horse racing allows bettors to place wagers on prior horse races with no identifiable information. The pari-mutuel terminals have spinning wheels, sounds and animations that mimic slot machines. Unlike the one-armed bandits, pari-mutuel betting is legal in Idaho because it pits bettors against each other and the house takes a percentage of the winnings.

Otter's spokesman, Jon Hanian, said the governor will elaborate more about his intentions involving the future of instant horse racing in Idaho during his annual address to state lawmakers in January. However, despite the governor's statement, Hanian told the Associated Press that Otter is not explicitly calling for the return of instant racing.

"The governor is saying this topic is not over," Hanian said. "The debate is ongoing."

Repealing instant racing was one of the Idaho Legislature's most divisive issues during this year's session. Opposition to the machines was led by the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, which profits from its own video gambling on the reservation and faced competition from the new horse racing versions. Meanwhile, proponents argued that the machines were vital to sustaining the horse industry because a portion of the profits went to sustain various racing owners and breeding groups.

Creating a state gaming commission was proposed during the thick of the hearings, but the legislation failed to gather enough traction to make it through either chamber.

