

**Opening Address by Charlie McConalogue T.D., Minister for Agriculture, Food and the
Marine to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine**

Draft Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2023

Chairman, Members of the Joint Committee,

Introduction

Ensuring that the horse and greyhound racing industries achieve their maximum potential, and in so doing, contribute to economic and social development over a wide geographic distribution is an important aspect of Government policy.

The valuable contribution to a balanced regional economy made by both the horse and greyhound industries is well recognised. It is estimated that the thoroughbred industry has an annual economic impact of €2.46 billion with direct and indirect employment of 30,000 people, and the greyhound sector benefits an estimated 10,000 people.

The importance of these industries has been acknowledged by successive Governments and they are supported through legislation and policy initiatives. The world class reputation for excellence in horseracing, greyhound racing and breeding that Ireland enjoys today has been enabled by the support provided through public funds.

The thoroughbred industry, in particular, brings a high level of international investment into Ireland. We are truly world class in this space with the success we achieve on the track, as well as the continued excellence we achieve in breeding.

The Irish equine breeding and racing industry is extremely competitive at an international level with our excellence in this space is well acknowledged globally.

Ireland is the second largest producer of bloodstock in the world by value sold, after the USA. Ireland also has the world's third highest number of thoroughbreds foaled each year after the USA and Australia. The thoroughbred sector is a firm part of our identity.

We look forward to working with Rásaíocht Con Éireann and its newly appointed Chief Executive Officer as it develops a new Strategic Plan. It is important to acknowledge the significant strides made by the industry in the areas of integrity and welfare in the last few years and my Department supports RCÉ in its progress and ongoing work in these important areas.

Government funding, in addition to supporting these key industries, presents an excellent opportunity to yield a high return for its investment, leading to a flow of income through many levels of the economy, thereby providing widespread benefits for our society. The sectors are also crucial in driving a geographically balanced economy throughout our country.

The Fund

The horse and greyhound racing industries receive financial support from the State through the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund, under Section 12 of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001. Payments are made from the Fund to Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) and to Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ).

In the period 2001 to date, a total of €1.64 billion has been paid from the Fund to the horse and greyhound racing industries in accordance with the provisions of the Act. The cumulative upper limit on payments from the fund, provided for under the relevant regulations, has been reached.

Exchequer support provided from the Fund is crucial to the survival and continued development of the horse and greyhound racing industries. In order to give effect to the provisions of Budget 2024, this cumulative upper limit must be increased by regulation.

The Estimates for my Department, passed by both Houses as part of Budget 2024, include an allocation of €95m for the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund. This will be distributed in

accordance with Section 12(6) of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, with 80% going to HRI (€76m) and 20% to RCÉ (€19m).

In order to allow my Department to provide the monies allocated in Budget 2024, it is necessary to comply with the technical requirement under Section 12 (13) of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, to increase the cumulative limit on the amount payable from the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund by €95m, to some €1.735 billion.

This is achieved by way of the Regulations submitted to this Committee today. The aggregate limit on the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund has been increased in this manner in 2004 and in 2009 to 2022 inclusive.

Horse Racing Industry

According to the Deloitte 2023 report it is estimated that the Irish thoroughbred industry has an annual economic impact amounting to €2.46 billion and supports direct and indirect jobs of some 30,000 people.

The total value of Irish-foaled exports sold at public auction in 2022 amounted to over €293m.

Horse racing generates a significant return to the rural economy in Ireland and a positive international profile for our country. Of course, behind all the facts and figures are the thousands of people who, directly and indirectly, make the Irish racing and breeding industry what it is today.

Statistics released by HRI for horse racing and breeding in Ireland for the first six months of 2023 point to a continued resilience in the industry. Many figures compare favourably to the first six months of 2019, the last full year before the Covid-19 pandemic.

As proven in 2023 to date, Irish owners, trainers, jockeys and horses are setting standards globally, and their exceptional achievements and enduring influence underscore Ireland's international prominence.

The Irish equine breeding and racing industry is extremely competitive globally, despite other major racing nations having much larger populations and economies. The incredible passion and commitment to excellence displayed by everyone in the sector from yard staff to jockeys to owners allows us to consistently punch above our weight.

The importance of a strong welfare and integrity foundation to this highly successful industry is crucial and this is well recognised throughout the industry. We continue to work with HRI, the IHRB and other relevant stakeholders to ensure the highest standards of integrity and welfare are maintained.

In that regard, in November 2021, this Committee published a report on Horse Racing in Ireland. At the Committee's request, an international equine anti-doping expert, Dr. Craig Suann, was commissioned to conduct an independent review of the IHRB's Equine Anti-Doping Programme. This review concluded that the programme does "at least match international best practice in most respects and has made significant advances in recent years".

It is worth noting that Government funding, in addition to supporting this key industry, also presents an excellent opportunity to yield a high return for its investment leading to a flow of income right through the economy. Support for certain strategic industries is important for future economic growth and can provide widespread benefits for our society as well as for our economy.

The EU/UK Brexit Trade agreement reached in December 2020 which included the Northern Ireland Protocol, and the more recent Windsor Framework Agreement were welcome. However, the facility to move horses freely without veterinary certification between Ireland and Britain (under an agreement known as the Tripartite agreement) no longer applies, and this has added cost and a significant administrative burden to such movements.

The global nature of major breeding operations illustrates that while Ireland arguably now has leadership position within Europe, its pre-eminence is not guaranteed.

Greyhound Racing Industry

As highlighted in the 2021 Power Report, the greyhound industry provides and supports considerable employment across the Irish economy. It is estimated that in 2019, the industry both directly and indirectly, supported over 4,000 full-time and part-time jobs in the economy. In addition, there are over 6,000 active greyhound owners. The total number of people deriving economic benefit from the sector is estimated at over 10,000.

The greyhound racing industry and part of the social fabric of our country. The funding provided to the greyhound racing sector helps sustain a long-standing tradition and underpins economic activity across the country. The particular importance of the funding of this industry to rural Ireland is well recognised.

The future of the industry is dependent on a strong governance platform and on the industry having the highest standards of integrity and welfare, founded on a robust regulatory system. There is a strong commitment to improved animal welfare in this sector in the Programme for Government.

Provisions in the Greyhound Racing Act 2019 which came into effect on the 28th May 2019 will make a real difference in this regard. This legislation strengthens the legal basis for the industry, with a view to fortifying the integrity of the greyhound racing sector and improving provision for greyhound traceability.

The new Act improves the governance of Rásaíocht Con Éireann, strengthens regulatory controls in the industry, modernises sanctions and improves integrity within the sector. It provides the industry with real tools with which it can effect fundamental change and reform.

It facilitates the Board in focusing on its priority objective of achieving the highest standards of care and welfare of greyhounds. Further Commencement Orders for the small number of remaining sections will continue to be phased in as expediently as possible and, as implementation continues, enable RCÉ to ensure the important heritage associated with greyhound racing in Ireland can continue under the appropriate rules and regulations.

My Department, along with the sector itself, is committed to the continued strengthening of welfare standards in the greyhound industry. Future funding of the sector is contingent on welfare standards being upheld and this is reflected in annual parameters set out by my officials in their liaison with RCÉ.

A key element of the new legislation is the provision for the first time for a full IT traceability system for racing greyhounds. The Rásaíocht Con Éireann Traceability System (RCÉTS) came into operation on 11th January 2021. The system provides a mechanism to ensure that racing greyhounds are properly registered and traceable throughout their lives up to the point of rehoming/retirement.

These life stages include birth, registration, racing career, all changes of ownership and location, and end of life. Data from the system at the end of September 2023 indicate that 42,611 greyhounds were subject to traceability.

RCÉTS Phase 2 is currently in development and this will include additional functionality to facilitate the recording of injuries at RCÉ licensed stadia during racing, official and unofficial trials, the capture of details relating to euthanasia of a greyhound by a veterinary surgeon, the capture of medical records and health checks carried out by veterinary surgeons, the recording of sampling history and adverse analytical findings and report details of offences under the Greyhound Racing Act 2019.

In addition to its care and welfare programme, RCÉ has a comprehensive range of activity in the areas of regulatory, integrity and laboratory functions. This includes activity on welfare inspections/investigations, testing regimes, veterinary services, and financial support for the Irish Retired Greyhound Trust and contributions to private rehoming agencies.

Conclusion

Given the wide geographic distribution of these two industries, they are fundamental to the achievement of more balanced regional economic growth.

Nurturing rural economies is a key priority for Government and in this context, these industries should be given recognition for the considerable contribution that they make to rural economic activity and employment.

The welfare of horses and greyhounds is a cornerstone of both industries, and I am assured that HRI and RCÉ are striving to ensure the highest standards for the sports and their participants, on and away from the racecourse. The Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund has played a key role in providing this investment and has been instrumental in the shaping of these industries and the many livelihoods they support.

Brexit, in addition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, continues to pose an array of challenges to the Irish economy and coupled with the fact that we are a small and open economy naturally prone to volatility, it can be somewhat difficult to fully predict what the future holds. It is therefore crucial that we support these important industries and their continued navigation through these challenges as we enter 2024.

The support of the Committee is now sought to ensure that Horse Racing Ireland and Rásaíocht Con Éireann receive the funding provided for in Budget 2024. This support ensures that the very

important role played by these industries, and the economic activity generated by them, are sustained into the future.

I commend this regulation to the Committee, and I look forward to discussing any matters arising.

Thank you.