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International animal rights groups ask Noked to block Israeli horse racing

'Industry would be cruel to horses, financially detrimental'

• By SHARON UDASIN

In collaboration with local animal rights organization Hakol Chai, both People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the British Animal Aid organization sent letters to Agriculture and Regional Development Minister Orit Noked on Monday, demanding that she prevent horse racing from coming to Israel.

Together, the three organizations are attempting to stop what Hakol Chai says are plans to bring in horse racing and gambling, industries that the groups say are ridden with cruelties and greed.

Monday's campaign followed a Hakol Chai protest at the end of October against an Agriculture Ministry decision to invest NIS 750,000 in horse breeding, which the organization charged was going to be predominantly used for breeding racehorses – an allegation the ministry denied.

The two international animal rights bodies submitted their letters in honor of the upcoming International Animal Welfare Day, which falls out on Saturday, according to a Hakol Chai spokeswoman.

"We expect the agriculture minister to act according to the Animal Protection Law, which the Agriculture Ministry is charged with enforcing, and prevent this industry from establishing a toehold in Israeli culture," said Hakol Chai professional manager Tal Sahar in a statement.

Kathy Guillermo, vice president of PETA, urged Noked to do all she could to dissuade the country from establishing a horse racing industry.

"Horsing is an industry fraught with cruelty," Guillermo wrote. "Thoroughbreds are victims of drug abuse, track and training conditions leading to injuries, over-breeding, abandonment and premature death."

Calling horses "victims of a system that discards horses who no longer turn a profit," Guillermo said that in 2011 alone, nearly 25,000 thoroughbreds had been foaled, and more than 10,000 had been sent to slaughter, according to PETA investigations. Meanwhile, she expressed concern that drugs, both legal and illegal, as well as unusual substances such as cobra venom, are being used to make horses run faster.

"Israel is already contending with a host of serious issues that adversely affect horses, including water shortages, lack of land availability, inadequate animal protection laws and shortage of humane enforcement officers," she added. "If horse racing is permitted, these problems will only worsen, to the detriment of both humans and animals."

Dene Stansall, horse racing consultant at Animal Aid, called the industry "unethi-



THE HORSE RACING industry exploits both horses and people, according to international animal rights groups. (Illustrative photo: horseracing.com)

cal," emphasizing that it exploited both horses and people. In his letter to Noked, he stressed that Israel should focus on five different reasons to back away from the horseracing industry: horse welfare as per the 1994 Animal Protection Law, the economics of the racing industry, infrastructure, cultural aspects and the global racing scene.

In the first category, Stansall pointed to the high incidences of injury and mortality among the racehorses, as well as the "disposal" of "unwanted animals" that occurs after their short careers. Meanwhile, he argued, the over-breeding that is intrinsic to the industry causes surpluses of animals that don't make it to the races and have nowhere else to go.

Regarding economic concerns, he said that "it would be naive to believe that horse racing could generate any substantial income" for Israel. The industry would require many more imports than exports, and the country would have trouble both selling broadcasting rights to international corporations and maintaining a stable betting market in such a relatively small population, he argued.

Likewise, in terms of infrastructure, Israel would need to invest huge amounts of money in a racecourse – an effort that already failed with a course partially built in Gilboa, which Stansall said "would not stand up to consistent racing."

"A government ministry offer of over 750,000 NIS in public funds to farms willing to breed race horses in Israel would be a huge shortfall in establishing any successful commercial production," he wrote. "This would have no impact on local or global bloodstock markets and is an extremely naive venture. Israel simply could not compete. It lacks 'quality' brood-

mares and stallions, which singularly cost more [than] the ministry's proposed investment."

He also stressed that Israel lacked any incidence of horseracing in its culture, a fact he called "a prerequisite to failure" in a world where the sport is highly unstable.

In response to the letters received on Monday, the ministry said that its NIS 750,000 investment simply aimed to bring the local horse-breeding industry up to the standards of other Western nations, in areas such as promoting their welfare, their growth, their training and treatment.

"These ministerial activities are not designed to provide services to [a hippodrome], but to satisfy fittingly an emerging industry in a large number of aspects that are not related to running a hippodrome," a statement from the ministry said.

Meanwhile, the ministry said it expected that this investment, along with the office's decision to publish acceptable practices for horse breeding, would "propel the professionalization of the horse industry in Israel" and enhance therapeutic, rehabilitative and sport riding. The industry will also increase employment opportunities and community services for periphery residents, the statement said.

Currently all horseracing takes place under the supervision of the ministry's Veterinary Services, and since procedures for such events were established in December 2006, no accidents have occurred whatsoever, according to the ministry.

"The Agriculture Ministry and the minister who heads it attach great importance to maintaining the welfare of animals in general and of racehorses in particular, according to the strictest standards accepted internationally," the statement said.