

## Ontario horse racing down 9,000 jobs after slots decision, industry estimates

Anecdotally, anyone in the Ontario's horse-racing sector knows the end of the Slots at Racetracks Program has dealt a devastating blow to the industry. Now there are numbers to prove it, and they are staggering.

The Ontario Horse Racing Industry Association has collected the data and reports that compared to the last full year of the slots program (2011), approximately 9,000 jobs have already left the horse racing industry as a whole, most of those in rural Ontario.

Meanwhile, more than 3,000 horse owners have left the industry, taking with them nearly \$850 million in investment, according to the racing industry's research.

That's based on 2010 data that shows that horse owners have an average of \$279,000 per owner invested in horses, tack and equipment and horse-related property improvements to farms in Ontario.

In the harness-racing sector alone, the number of horse owners licensed by the Ontario Racing Commission has declined 30 per cent from just over 7,600 in 2011 to a little more than 5,300 this year to date. That's a loss of investment of nearly \$650 million, according to the racing industry's research.

That investment loss has hit the breeding sector particularly hard. Since 2011, the number of Ontario mares bred is down 60 per cent; the number of foals registered from Ontario mares is down more than 60 per cent. The number of stallions standing in Ontario has declined 54 per cent.

It's not just the people that work directly with horses that have been affected. The number of commission-licensed employees at harness tracks in the province has already declined 31 per cent from nearly 8,800 in 2011 to some 6,100 today, a loss of 2,700 jobs at those sulky tracks alone. Research indicates that for every job at a track, there's an additional 2.5 jobs on farms, many of them belonging to unlicensed workers. That means the estimated job losses in the harness racing side of the business alone are approximately 6,750 or 75 per cent of the total horse racing job losses.

Further, the number of Standardbred Canada members in Ontario has dropped 20 per cent from just over 6,000 in 2011 to nearly 4,900 in 2013.

That, obviously, is the very bad news.

The slightly better news is it appears Premier Kathleen Wynne understands the devastating effect of her predecessor's decision to cancel the program, a move that caused more than 60 per cent of the industry's funding to evaporate which, in turn, destroyed investor confidence in Ontario, driving much of it to the United States.

There are indications that the three-member Horse Racing Industry Transition Panel tasked with fixing the mess is currently crafting a multi-year plan designed to stabilize the industry and at least give investors the details on which investment decisions can be made.

That plan is due in October and can't come soon enough for the province's suffering horse breeders who took a loss of more than 50 per cent at the 2012 fall yearling sales on horses produced before the government pulled the plug on the slots. Similarly, the matings that produced this year's crop of yearlings due to sell this fall were consummated in 2011 before the slots program was terminated.

Under the current environment — and given the huge losses the industry and the province have suffered already in the post-slots era — those breeders will take an even bigger bath this year unless the panel can come up with a plan that piques the interest of investors already once spurned.

Dave Briggs is the publisher and editor of *The Canadian Sportsman*, the oldest harness racing magazine in North America. He can be reached by e-mail at [dbriggs@canadiansportsman.ca](mailto:dbriggs@canadiansportsman.ca).



Doug McNair celebrates as he comes first across the finish line in the 16th annual Battle Of Waterloo race held at the Grand River Raceway during the Industry Day Celebration on Aug. 5, 2013. New research by the Ontario horse-racing industry suggests the sector has shed 9,000 jobs in the past year or so.