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Consultation gets underway on revised 2020/21 racing calendar

Consultation with the racing industry on a revised racing calendar from August 2020 to July 2021, which reflects the significant impact of Covid-19 on domestic racing and the critical need for racing industry reform, got underway today.

The implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the TAB and the wider industry has necessitated an immediate overhaul of the original, 'pre-Covid' draft racing calendar for 2020/21 and proposes a reduction of total meetings, including 43 fewer equine meetings, and with no betting licenses for 14 venues being used for any racing which had been previously allocated in the pre-Covid draft calendar.

Dean McKenzie, Executive Chair, Racing Industry Transition Agency (RITA) said the racing calendar was a critical driver to enable the recovery of New Zealand racing and an essential part of the overall reform programme being led by RITA and the three racing codes.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on racing, and accelerated the need for significant change across all levels of the industry.

"The leaders of New Zealand racing have repeatedly talked over decades about change but not been courageous enough to address the critical need for venue intensification. Repeated reports on the industry, including most recently by John Messara, as well as the industry-led future venue plan have identified that there were too many racing venues and this was a commercial drain on limited industry resources. Covid-19 leaves us with no other choice but to act.

"Over the last two years the racing Codes have undertaken considerable work identifying their optimal future venue footprint. The impact of Covid-19 has created greater financial need to accelerate the implementation of the codes' plans."

A key principle of the proposed changes are more meetings closer to where the horse and greyhound population is trained, with resulting increased intensification at venues.

"Ensuring meetings are located as close as possible, as often as possible to where the horse and dog population is located will result in improved net returns to the industry," said McKenzie. "The racing calendar generates the revenue for the Codes that ultimately end up in the stakes that drive domestic racing.

"The draft calendar means that some venues will miss out on racing licenses, and that is regrettable, but Covid-19 makes servicing almost 60 venues simply unsustainable and unappealing to the owners and participants who travel the length and breadth of NZ for meetings. Maximising the total returns to all of racing is the goal of the racing calendar and with revenue likely to be further challenged next year we have to cut costs and deliver the most efficient programme of racing possible."

Bernard Saundry, CEO, New Zealand Thoroughbred Racing said, "Every thoroughbred racing club in New Zealand has a history and a part to play. NZTR has done significant work over the past 18 months on a venue plan which will future proof the racing industry. We recognise that the calendar for 2020-21 looks very different to previous seasons with fewer meetings at fewer venues. The industry cannot survive, let alone move ahead, if we try to fit 2020s racing into a mould which was created last century."

Peter Jensen, CEO, Harness Racing New Zealand said, "The Government and industry participants have for some time been calling for meaningful change to the way racing is run. HRNZ and the wider industry needs to change and reposition itself to make its offer attractive and relevant to a wider audience. The Covid-19 pandemic has been the catalyst to accelerate the pace of change, however the reality is that proposed changes to our venue footprint are required to help harness racing become more sustainable, through increasing turnover, improving club's stakes to funding ratio, and decreasing costs to RITA, clubs, licensees and owners."

Michael Dore, Racing Operations and Welfare Manager of Greyhound Racing New Zealand said, ""For a number of years the GRNZ calendar has more-or-less followed the same weekly pattern of meetings. Travel restrictions imposed by the return from Covid-19 meant changes to our Monday and Tuesday routines. We are committed to maintaining a safe and sustainable racing product and the current situation gives us the opportunity to re-evaluate our racing product and continue with this pattern into the new season to minimise owners' costs. The consultation period will allow some time for further evaluation of these changes before progressing to the Final Calendar."

McKenzie said this week's announcement by the Government of two synthetic racing tracks didn't feature in the draft racing calendar for 2020/21 as it was unlikely these would be built in time to support racing this season.

"The draft calendar includes six meetings at the Cambridge synthetic track, which is currently being developed. Having another two world-class synthetic tracks operational in the near future will provide a further opportunity to review our racing venue footprint and ensure the industry delivers on the ambition laid by the Racing Minister 'to make racing great again'.

"These proposals are challenging for everyone in the industry, however action is required as the status quo is not sustainable. While RITA would like to see some further alignment between the codes with their plans going forward with some venues, the progress made with this calendar is very encouraging. RITA commends the racing codes for their leadership and courage in embracing change and making decisions in the best overall interests of the industry', said McKenzie.

A draft racing calendar has been released to racing clubs with consultation on the draft closing on 15 June. It is expected a final calendar will be released on 3 July, prior to the commencement of a new year of racing on August 1.

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