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GOVERNOR

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PRESERVING IDAHO'S HORSE RACING TRADITION IS A MATTER OF FAIRNESS

By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter

You might have heard recently about dozens of jobs being lost at horse racing venues in the Treasure Valley and eastern Idaho.

But you probably did not hear from the news media about the likely and unnecessary loss of many more related jobs and small businesses, several million dollars per year in state, county and city tax revenue; needed funding for public schools, a total of nine race tracks and more than 60 days a year of live horse racing.

All this in the wake of the Idaho Supreme Court's September decision to strike down my veto of legislation outlawing Idaho's historic horse racing operations. But let's go back a bit, to how we got here.

In 2013, the Idaho Legislature enacted and I signed into law legislation permitting pari-mutuel historic horse racing terminals in Idaho. But last winter, the Coeur d'Alene Tribe – not wanting more competition for gambling dollars – sponsored a bill to repeal the 2013 law. It passed both the House and Senate and landed on my desk for final consideration.

Knowing the potential economic impact on Idaho's traditional horse culture and popular horse racing operations, and not wanting to see their demise, I vetoed the repeal bill. The Idaho Senate then decided against overriding my veto.

Nonetheless, the Supreme Court found my action invalid. So be it.

This story isn't about me. It's about the devastating impact of that unfortunate decision, and all that led up to it, on the lives of thousands of Idaho families. Horse trainers, jockeys, hay farmers, stable hands, restaurant operators, veterinarians, hotel/motel owners, horse breeders and trailer manufacturers are among the multitude of folks threatened by this reversal.

Simply stated, Idahoans involved with the horse industry have been treated unfairly. I'm not willing to let something so integral to our culture simply disappear. I'm not willing to turn my back on an industry with businesses, ranches and farms – and most importantly people – contributing hundreds of millions of dollars to our communities and economy.

It's time to work collaboratively and constructively to preserve Idaho's horse racing industry. There are some tough decisions to be made and some hard work to do, but I'm ready to work with legislators and the industry to craft new laws in the next session of the Legislature.

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.

These actions will ensure that horse racing has a real opportunity to succeed in Idaho, in the proper venue and circumstances, respecting business and family values, without government suffocating an important part of Idaho's heritage.

It's a matter of fairness.

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