

Live horse racing will be back at Fair Meadows Racetrack for another year. The Tulsa County fair board voted 4-0 Tuesday to hold the races for the 26th consecutive year. The 400-race meet will be held June 5 to July 26. "As of this meeting, I can officially say there will be racing in 2014," Expo Square President and CEO Mark Andrus said after the fair board meeting. The long-term future of live racing at Fair Meadows remains less certain. Andrus declined to make any commitment to holding the races beyond 2014, noting that this year the live meet lost approximately \$900,000. The figure does not include the \$2 million the racetrack receives annually as part of its agreement with area tribes. "This will be a business arrangement that we look at continually on a year-by-year basis," Andrus said. Joe Lucas, executive vice president of the Thoroughbred Racing Association of Oklahoma, said the board's vote keeps the status quo at Fair Meadows. "It is always a good thing to have a future, and right now we have a future in Tulsa," Lucas said. "We hope to have a future in Tulsa." The state of live horse racing at Fair Meadows has been up in the air since 2012, when the fair board agreed to end live racing at the track as part of a \$1.44 million-a-year naming rights agreement with Muscogee (Creek) Nation. The deal was eventually rescinded after it was determined that Fair Meadows had signed an agreement with the state's horsemen associations pledging to run the 2013 races. Horsemen across the state criticized the board for its handling of the matter and claimed that they had not been included in discussions leading up to the vote. Without a license to hold live races, Fair Meadows would not have received the \$2 million a year it was getting from the Creek, Osage and Cherokee tribes in lieu of having gaming machines. The horsemen, meanwhile, were concerned that the tribes would not continue paying into a fund that went to horse-racing purses statewide. The purse fund averaged approximately \$6.9 million a year between 2007 and 2012. Andrus said again Tuesday that he is open

to other revenue-generating proposals that could replace the \$2 million the fairgrounds receives for holding the live horse racing meet. "We are continually looking for ways to increase revenue and minimize expenses in all of our operations at Expo Square," Andrus said.

Debbie Schauf, executive director of the Oklahoma Quarter Horse Racing Association, said that horsemen's first choice would be to keep live racing in Tulsa. "But if that can't happen, then what we would like to do is figure out how to make it as good as it could be somewhere else but still preserve the benefits we get from racing here," she said. Schauf and Lucas said fair board officials fail to recognize the economic impact the racing industry has statewide and the effect ending live racing at Fair Meadows would have. They noted a recent study, commissioned by the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture and several horsemen associations and race tracks, that shows the horse racing industry is responsible for 6,450 jobs in the state and has an annual economic impact of \$491 million. Overall, the state horse industry provides 35,070 full-time jobs and has an annual economic impact of \$3.7 billion, according to the report. "Most people don't realize the negative effect of losing Fair Meadows and losing 400 races is going to have on Oklahoma and Tulsa County," Lucas said.

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