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GAMBLING ISSUES: **Rise of slot machines decried**

Group calls for federal action, says states too dependent

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STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- Slot machines are becoming increasingly deceptive and addictive and the federal government should investigate and regulate them, an anti-gambling group said Friday.

The National Coalition Against Gambling Expansion called on the Federal Trade Commission to apply consumer and trade laws to slot machines because states are "too dependent" on gambling revenues to regulate them.

"America is presently on a gambling binge," said Tom Grey, the coalition's executive director.

"Ninety-two billion dollars was lost last year. ... Seventy percent of that comes from casinos, and I would venture that 80 percent of the casino take across the country comes from machines," Grey said at a news conference at the National Press Club.

FTC spokesman Mitch Katz said his agency would not comment until it has received a complaint or petition from the National Coalition Against Gambling Expansion.

During Friday's news conference, Natasha Schull, a visiting scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said there has been a dramatic shift since the 1990s from social gambling in which gamblers play against each other to asocial gambling in which gamblers play against machines.

Schull said she moved to Las Vegas to interview gamblers and manufacturers of slot machines for a book she recently completed but has not yet released.

"It really is no secret. The aim of these technologies is to make people play longer, faster and more intensively," Schull said.

The industry jargon for this goal, Schull said, is for the gambler to "play to extinction." Casinos want gamblers to enter the "machine zone," which she described as an "anesthesia from human concerns."

Schull estimated 90 percent of gamblers at numerous Gamblers Anonymous meetings she attended in Las Vegas played video gambling machines exclusively -- primarily video poker.

Addicted gamblers are motivated more by a desire to escape than to be entertained, Schull said.

"Winning in fact -- this really struck me during my research -- becomes almost undesirable for these gamblers because what it does is it interrupts the flow of the gambling," Schull said.

"One gambler even told me she hated to win because it meant she had to sit there and wait for the change girls to come and fill the hopper," she said.

Representatives of the major slot machine makers declined comment on the group's claims or request for federal regulation.

Frank Fahrenkopf, president of the American Gaming Association, rejected the anti-gambling coalition's charges and cited research showing gambling rates have fallen in several states, including California, Oregon and Delaware.

"The casino industry -- one of the most highly regulated industries in the country -- cares a great deal about disordered gambling," Fahrenkopf said in a statement.

"But to make claims about slot machines and gambling being 'increasingly addictive' and calling on the federal government to get involved based on false pretenses is not worthy of consideration," Fahrenkopf said.

The news conference also included a discussion of the ongoing battle over casino expansion in Philadelphia.

Daniel Hunter, a coordinator for Casino-Free Philadelphia, said there should be a 1,500-foot buffer between casinos and homes.

"Fifteen hundred feet is a very small amount," Hunter said. "It's not even the same distance you have (between homes and) a nuclear power plant or a waste facility even though people would actually rather have nuclear power plants than casinos right next to their homes."

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