

Pull the plug on TouchTab in Idaho

Jonathan Krutz Special to The Spokesman-Review

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Because of their addictive gambling speed, today's electronic gambling devices – like the TouchTab machines the Idaho Lottery has slipped into Idaho – are widely known as the crack cocaine of gambling. Gamblers can bet as fast as they can punch a button or slide their finger across a screen, at least once every five seconds, 12 bets a minute, 720 bets per hour.

At two dollars a bet, a serious gambler might bet as much as \$1,500 per hour on a TouchTab machine. That's not a scratch ticket. That's a slot machine.

Brown University psychiatrist Bob Breen found that gamblers get hooked on electronic machines far faster than other gambling because “gambling machines ‘deliver’ their ‘active ingredient’ more rapidly, continuously and directly than the traditional forms of gambling.”

About 60 percent of electronic gambling machine revenues come from gamblers with an addiction problem, according to research at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta. High-speed gambling means highly addictive gambling. TouchTab is high-speed gambling.

Idaho voters did not approve such rapid, addictive electronic gambling when they approved a lottery in 1988. In fact, the Idaho Constitution explicitly prohibits “slot machines, or ... any electronic or electromechanical imitation or simulation of any form of casino gambling.” Like tribal slot machines being challenged in court, TouchTab falls squarely within that prohibition.

But lottery doublespeak says “TouchTab games are nearly identical to paper PullTabs.”

That claim didn't fly in Iowa. Outraged to find the lottery installing slot machines in their neighborhoods, Iowans threw out TouchTab in 2006.

Now TouchTab has targeted Idaho.

The Idaho Lottery expects huge growth from TouchTab: \$190 million (in Idaho gambler losses) over the next five years. Of that, as we have seen, 60 percent – \$114 million – will likely come from a small percentage of Idahoans who cannot control themselves.

Good governance does not exploit the weak for profit.

A simple slogan, “Hook one gambler, pay for the machine; hook two, pay for the bar; hook more and it's all gravy,” helped spread electronic gambling across South Dakota. Idaho has chosen not to go down that path. But the Idaho Lottery has.

And it gets worse. With no public debate, TouchTab is creating significant new addiction-related costs for Idaho. Gambling addicts steal from friends and family; embezzle from employers (bankrupting some); burden the law enforcement, legal and prison systems; and lose their jobs, homes and families.

Economists call these costs “externalities.” The lottery won’t pay for them; the rest of us will.

In all, according to research by Baylor University economist Earl Grinols, gambling costs society \$3 for every \$1 it claims. The lottery trumpets \$190 million in “new” revenues but offers not a whisper about the new \$570 million in directly related costs the rest of will pay.

TouchTab slot machines are illegal, they depend on addiction for most of their revenue, and they will cost Idaho far more than they bring in.

So how has the lottery slipped these slot machines into Idaho? Despite one of Idaho’s biggest advertising budgets, the lottery is rolling out TouchTab quietly, hoping no one will notice.

Are they right?

It’s time for Idaho’s elected leaders to look into how far the lottery has strayed beyond its constitutional limits. It’s time for Gov. Butch Otter and Attorney General Lawrence Wasden to pull the plug on TouchTab slot machines and for our legislative leaders to examine how, with no public debate, the lottery has so easily slipped such a rapid, highly addictive form of gambling into Idaho’s towns and neighborhoods.

The lottery’s job is to make money. Is anybody watching how they do it?

Jonathan Krutz serves as treasurer of StopPredatoryGambling.org, a national movement spotlighting the economic, social, and good-governance costs of gambling, and on the board of its local chapter, Stop Predatory Gambling Idaho.