

**Subject:** Recommendations for government response to COVID-19 outbreak on B.C. mink farms

**Purpose**

This briefing note outlines implications of the recent human and animal outbreak of COVID-19 on a mink farm in British Columbia's Fraser Valley, and provides recommendations to control the spread of the disease to protect public and animal health, focusing on a moratorium on mink farming in the province.

**Background**

The BC mink industry is a small sector consisting of 13 operations providing \$4.7 million in annual value of pelts for export<sup>i</sup>. 2019 polling conducted by Research Co. found 85% of British Columbians are opposed to killing animals for fur (including 62% who are strongly opposed)<sup>ii</sup>, demonstrating pre-existing ethical concerns about a sector that does not contribute to the province's food security, a key priority of the Government of British Columbia.

Mink are permitted to be farmed in BC through exemptions to the *BC Wildlife Act's* prohibition on keeping of native wildlife. The mink farmed in BC are native species that are far-ranging, solitary, and semi-aquatic animals. In BC, mink are confined to small barren wire cages, tightly packed together in high densities on farms that are closely concentrated in the Fraser Valley.

The outbreak of COVID-19 on a mink farm in British Columbia was anticipated after the first reports from the Netherlands in April 2020<sup>iii</sup>. As of December 3, 2020, eight countries: Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Italy, Greece, Lithuania, and the United States of America - have reported SARS-CoV-2 in farmed mink to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)<sup>iv</sup>. In Denmark, from June to November 2020, 982 people associated with mink farming or pelting have tested positive for the virus<sup>v</sup>. As of December 1<sup>st</sup>, 20% of Denmark's mink farms have been affected<sup>4</sup>.

In spite of prudent government directions to tighten biosecurity on BC mink farms and inspection earlier in 2020, biosecurity measures proved insufficient to prevent transmission to animals in this concentrated, intensive industry in BC, which does not provide an essential service. Transmission of the virus between mink and humans can lead to dangerous mutations that may impact the effectiveness of vaccines, treatment, and public health measures. Mink themselves stand to suffer from SARS-CoV-2, as unlike other animals that have contracted the virus and show little-to-no symptoms, mink can become sick and die when infected. At this time, the practice of mink farming is at odds with the *Animal Health Act* due to the close contact between farmed mink and their caretakers, endangering both animal health and public health.

Depopulation at this time, after the autumn pelt harvest, is optimal as only breeding animals are on-site. This minimizes the economic and animal welfare impacts of this measure, and would prove more prudent than risking infection of future offspring, which would cause greater risks for virus spread and mutation. Accordingly,

negative impacts of performing a humane precautionary cull on all 13 farms are minimal, while upsides to preventing risk for disease spread and mutation are significant. Appropriate compensation for the operations could be considered to offset negative impacts on the owners, a measure both Denmark and the Netherlands have taken.

## Recommendations

The BC SPCA respectfully recommends that:

1. The Chief Veterinary Officer issue a precautionary moratorium on fur farming by suspending all fur farm licenses through 2021.
2. Consideration be given to humanely culling all farmed mink in British Columbia to prevent potential for their further suffering, using methods recommended by the American Veterinary Medical Association's Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals: 2020 Edition<sup>vi</sup>.
3. Testing of mink and employees on all BC mink farms for SARS-CoV-2 be conducted to determine whether other exposures may have already occurred on other farms.
4. Consideration is given to providing compensation to impacted persons and economies.

## Consideration

In the face of a global pandemic created by the transmission of a virus from wild animals to people, we recommend strong precautionary measures against further inter-species transmission of SARS-CoV-2 that could further threaten human and animal health, through a moratorium of mink farming in British Columbia.

## BC SPCA Subject Matter Experts

As the largest animal welfare organization in B.C. with experts in the field of farm animal welfare, the BC SPCA is a longstanding leader on issues of farm animal and wildlife welfare. Further, the BC SPCA's power to investigate complaints of farm animal cruelty and enforce the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* (the "PCA Act") and the animal-related sections of the *Criminal Code*, uniquely positions the organization to protect farm animals. Our subject matter experts available to support government on this file include:

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<sup>i</sup><https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3210011501&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.11&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.1&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2014&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2018&referencePeriods=20140101%2C20180101>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://researchco.ca/2019/11/22/animals-canada/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/06/coronavirus-rips-through-dutch-mink-farms-triggering-culls-prevent-human-infections>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.who.int/csr/don/06-november-2020-mink-associated-sars-cov2-denmark/en/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.who.int/csr/don/03-december-2020-mink-associated-sars-cov2-denmark/en/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.avma.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Guidelines-on-Euthanasia-2020.pdf>