

Commissioner Stella Kyriakides
Health and Food Safety
European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

Re: Urgent Commission action needed to suspend mink breeding

Brussels, 19th February 2021

Dear Commissioner Kyriakides,

We, Members of the European Parliament, are writing to express our grave concerns about the continued outbreaks of COVID-19 on mink farms in Europe and to call on the Commission to take decisive action to halt mink production in order to prevent the creation of unnecessary reservoirs for the disease.

At present, only 20% of cages on mink fur farms are occupied. The majority of animals will have been gassed to death for their pelts in late November/early December, leaving only those selected for breeding purposes. However, at the end of February, the production cycle will start anew. The breeding males will be placed in cages with the females to mate. By early May, when the pups are born, the mink population – and the size of the potential coronavirus reservoir – will have increased at least five-fold.

There is still a small window of opportunity to prevent this from happening. We therefore strongly urge the Commission to act to protect public health by instructing Member States to suspend the breeding of mink this year.

COVID-19 outbreaks on fur farms Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Greece, Italy, France, Lithuania and Poland – as well as in the US and Canada – have confirmed that mink are highly susceptible to the disease. The fact that the SARS-CoV-2 virus spreads rapidly among these undomesticated animals, who are confined in close proximity to one another in small wire cages suffering stress and a poor quality of welfare, and has been found to also be transmittable back to humans, confirms that fur farms can act as an animal reservoir for this coronavirus.

The experience of both Denmark and the Netherlands in dealing with widespread outbreaks of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in their mink herds clearly demonstrated that the biosecurity and surveillance measures adopted by the industry and competent authorities have not been successful in preventing the transmission and spread of the virus. The problem has also not gone away. Indeed, in recent weeks, SARS-CoV-2 has been detected in mink on fur farms in Poland, Spain, Italy and Greece; and this is before the breeding season has even begun.

In view of the risks posed by coronavirus in fur animals, the Swedish government has already responsibly taken action to suspend mink production in 2021. Mink producers in Sweden will not have to cull their breeding stock, but will also not be able to breed with these animals this year. Likewise, Belgian fur farmers have also voluntarily decided to suspend mink breeding due to the risks associated with COVID-19.

We believe that – save for ending mink production altogether – this was the most responsible course of action that can be taken. It is vital that the remaining Member States, which still permit fur production, follow the Swedish and Belgian example. Given that there is no indication that they will do so voluntarily, **it is critical that the European Commission – as part of its management of the COVID-19 situation in the EU – takes action to order them to suspend mink breeding for at least the duration of 2021.**

Monitoring and surveillance of the health status of both the animals and those who interact with them occupationally will, of course, still be needed, but this should be less expensive than testing for coronavirus on mink farms at full occupancy. If the virus is detected on these farms then the extent of the culling of animals and suffering of infected animals will be more limited.

It is pertinent to note when the SARS-CoV-2 virus was first discovered in mink in the Netherlands in April 2020, there was a high level of mortality and respiratory disease among pregnant females and newborn pups. Not breeding while COVID-19 is still widely circulating in human populations will help to prevent this unnecessary suffering and mortality.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that viral genome sequencing has already shown how SARS-CoV-2 infection in mink can lead to dangerous mutations of the spike-proteins which, if transmitted to human populations, could potentially undermine the efficacy of the vaccines that are needed to end this global coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, the discovery of the so-called 'Cluster 5' mink virus mutation in humans was what precipitated the Danish government's radical decision to cull its entire mink herd.

It was believed that this dangerous mutation had been eradicated in November 2020, but doubts on this have been shed by the recent discovery of the Cluster 5 variant in human patients in Germany during the past weeks. It is extremely concerning that such a mink variant may still be in circulation among the human population.

Given the enormous impact of the coronavirus pandemic on both public and economic health, the risk of allowing the mink population to expand exponentially – thereby creating a larger disease reservoir - should not be tolerated. We therefore urge the Commission to instruct Member States to take action to ensure that the risks of farming animals for fur, a luxury product that no-one actually needs, are minimised.

Yours sincerely,

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