

DYRENES BESKYTTELSE



January 7th, 2021

Re: SARS-CoV-2 reservoirs on mink farms and call for EU action

Dear Minister Rasmus Prehn,

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage across Europe, the undersigned organisations are hereby **calling on your support to urge the European Commission to adopt precautionary emergency measures and take a harmonised EU approach with regard to COVID-19 on mink fur farms.**

In recent months, the continuation of mink farming during this pandemic has generated growing concerns, as COVID-19 has affected more than 370 mink farms in at least nine Member States. It is crucial that the EU provides a strong and harmonised response to this critical public health issue.

Nature and scale of the problem

Mink are highly susceptible to SARS-CoV-2. The latest scientific studies demonstrate that American mink, as well as raccoon dogs,¹ can act as a reservoir for the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is therefore evident that mink – and most likely also raccoon dog - farming creates a potential reservoir for SARS-CoV-2 and future strains of the coronavirus. The virus can jump back and forth between humans and mink, with the potential for the virus to mutate in mink prior to infecting humans with new variants.²

In April 2020, the first cases of SARS-CoV-2 were identified on mink farms in the Netherlands. In the months since, coronavirus outbreaks have continued to affect hundreds of mink farms not only in the Netherlands, but also in Denmark, Sweden, Greece, Spain, Italy, France and, most recently, new infections have been identified on mink farms in Poland and Lithuania.

Given that the rapid and uncontrolled spread of SARS-CoV-2 on mink farms has not been halted by the implementation of biosecurity measures, the animals have become the source of viral transmission to people; not only those who work on fur farms occupationally, but also the broader human community. Even more alarmingly, the uncontrolled spread in mink has also increased the opportunity for the virus to evolve and develop potentially dangerous mutations. Evidence available on SARS-CoV-2 variants related to mink indicates that these variants are able to circulate rapidly on mink farms and the human communities close to the farms.³

In Denmark, a mutation has been found in mink that may have led to a reduced response to antibodies. Apart from Denmark and The Netherlands, mink-related mutations in humans have also been found in South Africa, Switzerland, the Faroe Islands, Russia, Canada and the United States.⁴

¹ https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/12/20-3733_article

² Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 on mink farms between humans and mink and back to humans. Science, 10 November 2020: <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/early/2020/11/09/science.abe5901>

³ European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Detection of new SARS-CoV-2 variants related to mink – 12 November 2020. ECDC: Stockholm; 2020. . <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/detection-new-sars-cov-2-variants-mink>

⁴ Recurrent mutations in SARS-CoV-2 genomes isolated from mink point to rapid host-adaptation

Lucy van Dorp, Cedric CS Tan, Su Datt Lam, Damien Richard, Christopher Owen, Dorothea Berchtold, Christine Orengo, François Balloux

Views of Health Organisations and Member States

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) has warned that the spread of SARS-CoV-2 variants via mink farms could compromise the efficacy of a vaccine⁵. Furthermore, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)⁶ and World Health Organization (WHO)⁷ have also shared concerns and called on countries to implement effective risk management measures, including actions to actively monitor susceptible animals, such as mink and raccoon dogs, as well as humans in close contact with them.

At the last meeting of EU Agriculture Ministers in November 2020,⁸ Member States stated that this public health issue requires a strong and harmonised response at an EU level. Fourteen Member States have already decided to phase out and (sometimes partially) ban fur production while six Member States are currently considering legislative proposals to end fur production within their borders. Several opinion polls have repeatedly highlighted that EU citizens have a very critical attitude towards fur farming and support the prohibition of the practice⁹. The Austrian Federal Minister of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection called for an EU-wide end of the fur industry on public health and animal welfare grounds.¹⁰

The European Union must give a strong response

The presence spread and genetic mutation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus on fur farms has become an EU-wide issue. Although we recognise the efforts undertaken by the EU to overcome the immediate health crisis, **this important issue has not yet received an effective, harmonised response at an EU level.**

Notwithstanding our unwavering position that fur farming should be permanently banned across the EU due to unacceptable animal welfare outcomes and future potential public health risks, in the interim, the undersigned organisations ask your support to secure a statement from Denmark during the next meeting of the Agricultural and Fisheries Council in January, which calls on the European Commission to take action on fur farming across the EU. We are confident that as Minister of Agriculture of Denmark your engagement on this important issue would help to raise the subject at the next Agricultural and Fisheries Council meeting. Not only this action is essential for the prevention of future pandemics but is also important for the protection of animal welfare.

To these ends, the undersigned organisations call on Denmark to urge the European Commission to adopt precautionary emergency measures and take a harmonised EU approach to COVID-19 in mink fur farms, by urgently suspending:

- **all mink farming including breeding and;**
- **all in-country and cross-border transportation of live mink and their raw pelts, both inside and outside the European Union.**

bioRxiv 2020.11.16.384743; doi: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.11.16.38474>

⁵ European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Detection of new SARS-CoV-2 variants related to mink – 12 November 2020. ECDC: Stockholm; 2020. . <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/detection-new-sars-cov-2-variants-mink>

⁶ OIE statement on COVID-19 and mink – 12 November 2020: <https://www.oie.int/en/for-the-media/press-releases/detail/article/oie-statement-on-covid-19-and-mink/>

⁷ SARS-CoV-2 mink-associated variant strain – Denmark, 6 November 2020: <https://www.who.int/csr/don/06-november-2020-mink-associated-sars-cov2-denmark/en/>

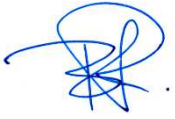
⁸ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/agrifish/2020/11/16/>

⁹ <https://www.furfreealliance.com/public-opinion/>

¹⁰ https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20201119_OT50185/anschober-es-braucht-ein-europaweites-ende-der-pelzuchtindustrie

For your information, please find enclosed and [here](#) the Fur Free Alliance/Eurogroup for Animals' position paper on this issue.

Yours sincerely,



Britta Riis,
CEO Dyrenes Beskyttelse



Joh Vinding,
CEO Anima