

March 29, 2021

Sen. Jeff Golden, Chair  
Committee Members  
Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery

**RE: SUPPORT SB 832 TO PHASE OUT MINK FARMING AND PROTECT PUBLIC HEALTH**

Dear Chair Golden and Committee Members:

On behalf of the Animal Wellness family of organizations, I respectfully submit the following comments in support of SB 832, the bill to end mink farming in Oregon and assist mink farmers in transitioning out of the mink farm industry. This legislation arises due to the potent public health threat posed by mink farms as a result of minks' susceptibility to the coronavirus, as set forth below.

**COVID-19 OUTBREAKS ON MINK FARMS HAVE OCCURRED IN OREGON AND AROUND THE WORLD**

Researchers have confirmed that mink are especially susceptible to the novel coronavirus. Four of the top five mink-producing states, in the U.S., including Oregon, have experienced outbreaks, with infected farm workers transmitting the virus to thousands of mink. Similar outbreaks occurred in Europe, including 13 farms in Sweden as reported in late January, where authorities shuttered mink farms to stop them from turning into viral super-spreaders and producing new variants more resistant to newly developed vaccines. The largest mink-producer in the world, Denmark ordered the killing of 17 million mink after the Cluster-5 variant was discovered at mink farms. The government of China failed to be pro-active in addressing known concerns about live-wildlife markets spawning dangerous pathogens that could infect humans. We should not make the same mistake here, especially for an industry in a steep decline and already on a path toward dissolution.

**S.B. 832 IS A CRITICAL STEP IN PROTECTING THE HEALTH OF OREGONIANS**

S.B. 832 brings mink farming in Oregon to an end, but in a way that helps mink producers transition to new commodities or other lines of work. In essence, the bill will accomplish the following:

- 1. Brings mink farming in Oregon to an end.**

Confronting the serious threat to public health, the bill prohibits mink farming in Oregon as soon as deemed feasible by the Oregon Health Authority, but not later than 180 days after the effective date, nor earlier than 90 days after the OHA publicly declares an effective date.

## **2. Halts breeding programs to arrest the spread to host animals.**

Continued breeding while the virus is on the move is a prescription for a rapid spread of the virus. Immediately shrinking numbers of mink on farms is an essential component of containment; the greater the number of infected hosts, the greater the chance of a new variant. Accordingly, the bill will prohibit breeding or transporting mink to or from a mink farm; prohibit working at a mink farm unless a person has tested negative for Covid-19 within the previous 10 days; and requires the Oregon Department of Agriculture to establish a contact tracing program for persons who work on mink farms

## **3. Opens access to mink producers to programs to assist them in the transition away from mink farming.**

Mink producers in Oregon had no way of knowing their animals would end up playing a role in the propagation and spread of Covid-19, and any effort to end mink farming should take into consideration the hardship they face both with the viral outbreaks and the dwindling fortunes of the fur industry in general. S.B. 832 will provide those producers with priority status in Oregon workforce programs, eliminate fees for registering new commodities they may seek to grow, and provide them with access to small business loans to assist with their transition.

## **MINK HOUSING SYSTEMS PROMOTE RAPID SPREAD OF THE VIRUS**

Mink farms intensively confine the mink, housing thousands of animals in barren, cramped, and crowded conditions, creating ideal conditions for a single infected mink to spread the virus to thousands of animals in a matter of hours. Mink have been bred in captivity for about 150 years, and as wild animals, they retain their innate behaviors, including the desire to wander and roam over vast areas in a semi-aquatic environment. When kept in cages, the mink experience frustration and stereotyped behaviors, and even resort to cannibalism, self-mutilation, and infanticide – and this severe stress makes them more vulnerable to the onset of disease.

## **THE THREAT TO HUMAN HEALTH IS REAL AND GROWING**

There is now evidence from studies in Denmark and the Netherlands that not only is the virus capable of being transmitted from mink to human, but it may do so in a mutated form. According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), between June 2020 and January 2021, Denmark reported over 1,000 human cases of infection with a mink-related variant of the virus<sup>1</sup> that spread from the North to the South, with estimates from Danish Authorities as high as 4,000 human cases caused by mink variants.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> European Food and Safety Authority and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, Anette Boklund et al, Monitoring of SARS-CoV-2 infection in mustelids, Scientific Report, EFSA Journal, Jan, 2021, doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2021.6459 <https://efsa.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.2903/j.efsa.2021.6459>

<sup>2</sup> Id.

The acute concern is that the mutation will allow the virus to resist newly developed vaccines now being administered under Emergency Use Authorization or those in development – a circumstance that has the potential to upend vaccine development and administration. The World Health Organization has called the mutation concerning and has called for further studies to ascertain the impact on vaccines currently in development. The “cluster-5” mutation found in Denmark has a combination of mutations that had not previously been observed. Early findings indicate that this mutation decreased sensitivity to neutralizing antibodies in humans.<sup>3</sup>

The World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) recently issued guidance that describes the truly shocking facts about farmed mink and transmission of COVID-19:<sup>4</sup>

- The risk is high for human to animal transmission, moderate for animal to human transmission, and very high for transmission between animals.
- The risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission from infected farmed minks to humans in contact with the mink is high.
- The risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission between farmed and domestic animals on infected mink farms is high for cats and dogs.
- The risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission between farms through movement of live infected mink is high.
- The risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 between different mink farms through infected humans is considered high.
- The risk of transmission of SARSCoV-2 through import/export of carcasses or products from infected animals of the susceptible species listed above is considered low to medium.

An outbreak on large farms may take several months before the virus fades out. Events in the Netherlands and Denmark show ongoing new outbreaks caused by mink associated variants of SARS-CoV2, pointing at ongoing transmission between farms and transmission from mink to humans.<sup>5</sup>

A recent study in the Netherlands states that by the end of June 2020, 68 percent of mink farm workers and their family members tested positive for the virus or had antibodies to SARS-CoV-2. These large clusters of infection were initiated by human COVID-19 cases and have subsequently shown that mink-to-human transmission occurred.<sup>6</sup> In late January, Sweden reported on the death of a mink worker there.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.who.int/csr/don/06-november-2020-mink-associated-sars-cov2-denmark/en/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.oie.int/fileadmin/Home/MM/Draft\\_OIE\\_Guidance\\_farmed\\_animals\\_cleanMS05.11.pdf](https://www.oie.int/fileadmin/Home/MM/Draft_OIE_Guidance_farmed_animals_cleanMS05.11.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Bas B. Oude Munnink et al, Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 on mink farms between humans and mink and back to humans, Science 08 Jan 2021: Vol. 371, Issue 6525, pp. 172-177, DOI: 10.1126/science.abe5901

<sup>6</sup> Id.

These studies confirm that there is a risk of establishing a reservoir of SARS-CoV-2 due to ongoing transmission between farms.<sup>7</sup> In Oregon, mink recently escaped from a quarantined mink farm and were later trapped and tested positive for SARS-CoV-2.<sup>8</sup> On the run, infected mink came into contact with an indeterminate number of other animals of multiple species, contributing to the risk of a SARS-CoV-2 reservoir in wildlife, that could then be transmitted back to people, perhaps in a mutated form.

Simply put, a virus spawned by the inhumane treatment of animals in China at the end of 2019 may now be spread by ongoing mistreatment of animals here in our own nation. Should a mink farm contribute to a new wave of infections – with infected workers bringing the virus back into their communities – government leaders may order future lockdowns of businesses, extending the lifespan of the extraordinary social and business dislocations of the past year. Live-wildlife markets put a global pandemic in motion, and mink farms may extend the life of that pandemic.

### **OREGON MINK FARMS ARE A THREAT TO NATIVE WILDLIFE**

The Oregon Department of Agriculture has confirmed that wild mink living near the mink farm where the outbreak occurred tested positive for Covid-19. Because the coronavirus uses the immune system of mink to mutate and spread, there is a very real possibility of the virus passing from farmed mink to wild mink, and possibly beyond to other wild species. Ending mink farming is thus an essential preventative measure to protect native species, who if infected could spread the virus.

### **OREGON MINK FARMS ONLY SERVE A FOREIGN LUXURY MARKET**

Prompted by animal welfare concerns, major fashion houses, clothing retailers, and American and European consumers have largely sworn off fur fashions. The only major market appears to be in China. And it is no small irony that the United States would assume enhanced domestic risks when it comes to the spread of COVID to supply a luxury product to China. It was China's political leaders who tolerated and promoted the expansion of open-air, live-wildlife markets even after these markets spawned the SARS virus in 2002 that became an epidemic; animal welfare advocates and scientists warned that it was just a matter of time for a new virus to emerge from these markets. Now we are incubating the virus on factory mink farms to clothe some small percentage of its citizens in fur. We'd be foolish to court this risk and allow this dynamic to persist for such a negligible amount of commerce.

France, the Netherlands, and other European countries have already recognized that the risks of mink farming far exceed the dwindling economic rewards it brings to the small group of people involved in this enterprise. The application of this analysis to the US is underscored by a recent USDA report (Mink, July 2020, National Agriculture Statistics Center, ISSN: 1949-1549) that documents the sharp economic decline of the US mink industry as major designers and retailers are foreswearing the use of fur. In 2011, US mink pelt values averaged \$94.30 and the industry generated over \$290 million income. By 2019, before COVID-19 struck, prices had plummeted to

---

<sup>7</sup> Id.

<sup>8</sup> Two Escaped Farm Mink Test Positive for COVID-19 During Mink Trapping Season, Willamette Week, Jan 14, 2021

\$21.90 per pelt, with gross revenues below \$60 million. Even as production was relatively stable, total revenues for the industry decreased five-fold.

It is also relevant, of course, that the commodity can readily be substituted for with human-made or natural fibers. Other U.S. manufacturers will fill the small void left by the elimination of the mink trade, upping production and creating jobs and commerce to compensate.

### **OREGON MUST MOVE QUICKLY TO STOP THE THREAT POSED BY MINK FARMS**

With the United States now recording record numbers of COVID-19 cases and the death toll on a pace to exceed a half million Americans, we know that more immediate steps are needed to address this ongoing crisis. One of our first steps should be to put an end to nonessential activities that present a high risk of spreading COVID-19 into our affected communities – like mink farming.

Prior to the mink outbreak in Denmark, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state animal and public health partners issued non-binding guidance for farmed mink and COVID-19 under the One Health Approach.<sup>9</sup> This guidance doesn't contemplate the potential risk of mutation that could lower neutralizing antibodies in humans. While the guidance suggests steps to slow the transmission, there is no indication that these steps are being implemented or enforced.

\* \* \* \*

For the foregoing reasons, we urge you to protect the health and safety of Oregonians and Oregon wildlife by voting YES on SB 832.

Sincerely yours,

Scott Beckstead  
Director of Campaigns

---

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal\\_health/one\\_health/downloads/sars-cov-2-guidance-for-farmed-mink.pdf](https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/one_health/downloads/sars-cov-2-guidance-for-farmed-mink.pdf)