

April 6, 2021

Senator Jeff Golden, Chair
Members of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery
Oregon State Legislature

Dear Senators and Committee Staff:

This testimony serves to reiterate and expand upon what I offered during yesterday's hearing. I also hope to provide context for my interest in your work on SB 832. I aim to voice a previously unconsidered majority I would term the "radical middle." Any good political compromise should leave each side somewhat disappointed. That is what I suggest you must do – look for a compromise that hasn't been addressed in the early stages of debate over SB 832.

I am not a resident of Oregon. I live in Seattle, WA. I am a writer. For the past decade, I've been investigating and writing a narrative nonfiction book about the modern global fur trade. My research has taken me to China, multiple European Union countries (including Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Italy) and a vast swath of North America (including most Canadian Provinces and American States where mink farming operations continue). I've interviewed approximately 300 sources from a wide variety of backgrounds and stances related to the use of animals in industry, including many of those who testified during yesterday's Committee hearing. I also grew up on a large, historic mink and fox farm in northern Wisconsin. My grandfather began raising silver foxes in 1917. The last animals raised on my family's 1880 homestead were "pelted" this past November following my father's passing on May Day last year. I've experienced firsthand every stage of fur farming. My work over the past decade represents a desire to understand the fur trade from "farm to fashion" and all the steps in between. I have endeavored to engage with and understand opposition to this trade. I have tried to understand the scientific, legal, political, economic and cultural meanings related to fur. While acting as an investigator, I remain a storyteller at heart. The story of the modern global fur trade and its earnest opposition is a rich story with countless layers. I believe my unique approach to gain a full field of vision on the mink industry as a dominant component in the larger fur trade affords me a singular position. Without intending to give my story away for free, I would like to draw on this experience to offer some suggestions regarding the current issue of mink and Covid-19 as it reverberates through prior arguments about the use of fur.

As always happens with debates related to the appropriateness of producing or using fur, two deeply entrenched positions emerge. Those positions are separated by a vast gulf of misunderstanding, no matter how much they share in common by way of their intractability. Both sides employ selective misinformation. A reliance upon emotional pleas and the vilification of the other side can be expected. Most regular folks tune out the noise, which prevents any effort to scrutinize those arguments. The wording used in response to the current crisis may be slightly different, but the basic motivations on both sides appear the same. To paraphrase – it's either "End Fur Farming Now" or "Leave Us Alone, We've Got This." No matter how redundant, I believe that these opposing arguments deserve equal consideration.

What's inescapably new this time around for fur's place in our society is the current global pandemic. This moment unlike any before after decades of contentious debate should shift the ground under the fur trade. Why? Because mink are highly susceptible to become infected with SARS-CoV-2 and they efficiently transmit it to other mink (and, according to an expanding body of worldwide research, to people). Mink are a likely viable intermediate/reservoir host for this coronavirus. The twist continues as mink are the only such presumed host species raised on farms. Those farms aren't currently regulated by the United States Federal or individual State governments. The mink industry practices a form of voluntary self-regulation. Mink industry misinformation about the prevalence of cat and dog transmission should be set aside. Do the math. Look at the science. Public health policy needs to recognize that mink farms may be a battlefield in a larger war against a global zoonotic opponent that brings with it deadly impact.

The Oregon Senate's effort to answer concerns related to mink farms represents a newly opened front in the debate over the fur trade in America. Having done so, you simply can't unring that bell. Something must be done. However, I argue alternatives should also be considered from the vast territory that separates the two seemingly irreconcilable positions of those in support of and opposed to raising mink on farms in Oregon.

If you are not able to substantially modify the aims of this legislation, I believe you should withdraw SB 832. If that's normal for your State's legislative process, I think you could best then immediately reintroduce legislation that calls for Oregon's mink operations to register themselves under a new system of regulation. To coincide with this, you should establish a surveillance and monitoring program for those newly registered farms to replace the industry-monitored, voluntary oversight that is currently in use. As Covid-19 vaccines for animals become available, you need to verify vaccination progress for both the mink and farm workers. Further venturing into this new realm - Oregon should offer a mink buyout program meant to compensate farmers if they choose to suspend operations (many of whom I imagine might if given ample compensation and since new government oversight contrasts with their belief systems). Those mink could be placed into a research program run at Oregon State University in Corvallis. Mink work well in research study models given their biological (especially respiratory system) similarities with us, including and beyond the current pandemic's coronavirus impact.

In a nutshell, I am suggesting that you let mink farmers continue caring for their animals. But only if they agree to a new plan for government oversight thanks to the current pandemic.

As if this isn't radical enough, I must point to an inevitable problem on the horizon that has also not been addressed. Vaccine competition between the various target species (and their human caretakers) will arise. What's been developed by Zoetis and other pharmaceutical companies will be in high demand in the coming months. The claim by mink industry representatives that they will be receiving two million doses of these vaccines before any plans have been released for captive great apes, big cats, or the tens of millions of companion animals in just the United States is a controversy not yet recognized. This brings to mind similar early rollout issues in the human population about who should be first in line when vaccines in whatever form became

available. If we are unable to identify how many doses will be required for the mink industry, how will the various levels of government and the private sector answer the soon-to-arise questions of when will those other at-risk animal populations be covered? This may sound minor, but I predict it will amplify as human vaccinations reach levels approaching herd immunity. Of all the unforeseeable issues related to this wiley viral adversary, we should at least begin to consider how best to manage the tools we can currently understand.

I indicated when I registered to testify that I was NEUTRAL on SB 832 as it was currently written. I maintain that position now, although all the above suggestions are meant to improve the Bill so that it might be supportable to not only me but for a larger portion of the public. I will finish by summarizing my expectation that if SB 832 passes in something close to its current form, you will be fighting over this issue for far longer than you can now see. The enactment timing (270 days from passage) means that, in a best-case scenario, you will be trying to close down what's been revised to only five mink farms (according to yesterday's testimony) in the Spring of 2022. Heaven forbid, but by that time what form might SARS-CoV-2 variants have taken? Will the efficacy of our essential vaccine tools be diminished? I will not speculate any more other than to suggest that immediacy is essential in this legislative action as it relates to Oregon's mink farms. Any delay could be catastrophic when dealing with a viral pandemic. My radical suggestions require all involved parties to admit that we have a real crisis that needs new thinking. Do I have high hopes for this plan? Definitely not. Nonetheless, no one has offered a new plan and what's in SB 832 currently will head down a long legal road to inaction. I believe you want to do what's best for the public health of Oregonians and need to explore compromises that will leave all parties feeling like they won something while also giving something up. Does my radical middle path do that? Maybe not. Yet I want to suggest that without creative address of this crisis, you are leaving the debate to the same old entrenched arguments that haven't presented a new way of responding. I wanted to present a magic bullet. Maybe I'm merely handing you a cocktail napkin with a clever set of talking points. It sure beats a bill that will take years to enact and will cost the Great State of Oregon millions in legal fees.

As it stands now, the two sides of this new debate over limiting fur production will most likely use SB 832 to merely raise contributions from supporters. No matter the state of the debate currently in Oregon, you've done something that no other American legislative body has attempted by introducing a fur farming ban. I've interviewed the politicians behind three of the four American municipal fur bans (West Hollywood, San Francisco, Los Angeles) and the one statewide ban (California). You should be learning from staff reports that other EU countries have banned fur farming operations and larger national fur trade bans are currently active (Israel and the UK). Now that this genie is out of the bottle in Oregon, you need to make your wishes for this legislation count. Holler back if you seek more insights. Regardless, I hope you find wise counsel and respite from the intense storm of debate to come. Stay safe and be well.

Ever –

Eric E. Magnuson
Seattle, WA