

October 20, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Sent via email

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the Center for a Humane Economy, Animal Wellness Foundation and Animal Wellness Action, I am writing you to ask that you act quickly to address the ongoing outbreak of COVID-19 on mink fur farms across the country and the threat it poses for our public health, communities, and our economy. Our nation is now experiencing tens of thousands of COVID-19 infections among captive mink populations in several states, and these facilities may turn into super-spreaders of the virus. To effectively counter this threat, I ask that you publicly acknowledge this threat and begin the process of phasing out the mink farm fur industry in the United States.

A virus that was spawned by the inhumane treatment of animals in China some 10 months ago may now be further spreading in the U.S. because of ongoing mistreatment of animals here in our nation. Should a mink farm contribute to a new wave of infections – with infected workers bringing the virus back into their communities – the economic impacts could be devastating as businesses might have to be shut down throughout the state.

A large share of U.S.-produced mink are sold to China, especially now because of declining interest in western markets for the commodity. 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 that recklessly tolerated open-air, live-wildlife markets and launched the virus around the world even after animal welfare advocates and scientists warned that a virus might jump the species barrier. Now we are incubating the virus at fur factories to clothe some small percentage of its citizens in fur. China might welcome this self-destructive act by the United States, but we shouldn't play along with it.

Nations like France and the Netherlands 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 your own recent report (Mink, July 2020, National Agriculture Statistics Center, ISSN: 1949-1549) which

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, those values have reached a decades-long low, with average pelt prices down to \$21.90 and industry revenues, at less than \$60 million, only a fifth of what they were just a decade earlier.

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 take up the slack if U.S. fur production diminishes, creating job and economic activity in place of it.

The countries shutting down mink production based their decisions on a careful risk assessment; it is not a close call with the current COVID-19 crisis, particularly when the time frame for the delivery of a vaccine is uncertain. That's why the Netherlands has committed to spending about \$200 million to rapidly phase out the industry.

We are calling on the USDA to show like-minded consideration for the economic and public health consequences of allowing this zoonotic disease to continue to spread throughout U.S. mink farms, but to show attentiveness to the producers by developing a government buy-out program for these products. With a total 2019 industry value of less than \$60 million, the expense to protect our communities from further COVID-19 outbreaks will be only a small part of what other nations have committed. It is also a relatively small amount compared to what the government allocates to other agricultural industries and a negligible amount compared to the trillions of dollars already committed by Congress in economic stimulus packages.

A buy-out of the US mink industry is the humane thing to do for the producers and for the mink that are being inhumanely raised and killed to sate foreign fashion desires. And it is the right economic and public health decision for the US.

We are happy to discuss this issue with your office and provide more information as needed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wayne Pacelle". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Wayne Pacelle, President
Animal Wellness Action