animal wellness action | CENTER FOR A HUMANE ECONOMY | animal wellness foundation

October 20, 2020

Governor Tony Evers
State Capitol
P.O. Box 7863
Madison, WI 53707-7863

Sent via email

Dear Governor Evers,

On behalf of the Center for a Humane Economy, Animal Wellness Foundation and Animal Wellness Action, I am writing you to ask you to take emergency action to address the ongoing outbreak of COVID-19 on mink fur farms located in your state and the public health threat it has the potential to foster.

Your state is now experiencing thousands of infections among captive mink populations, and these facilities may turn into superspreaders of the virus. At a time when we are witnessing a surge or second wave of COVID-19 cases in many states, it is critical to develop a containment strategy without delay.

A virus that was spawned by the inhumane treatment of animals in China some 10 months ago 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 -- businesses might have to be shut down throughout the state.

To counter this threat, we ask that you take the following steps:

1. **An immediate quarantine of all mink farm operations in the state.**

These facilities are more prone to COVID-19 outbreaks than any other agricultural operations because of the unique susceptibility of the mink to the virus. A number of studies have documented incidents of intraspecies transmission of COVID-19 from infected animals to other animals and humans.[1] Specifically with regard to mink operations, "[g]enetic and epidemiological sleuthing has shown that at least two farm workers have caught the virus from mink—the only patients anywhere known to have become infected by animals."[2]

Mink farms should be taken out of the stream of commerce as these rampant infection rates continue. There should be no movement of non-essential products or workers to and from

[1] https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhaseltine/2020/06/23/covid-19-ping-pong-animal-to-human-human-to-animal-animal-to-human-transmission-how-great-a-danger/#72aa003222f4
[2] https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/06/coronavirus-rips-through-dutch-mink-farms-triggering-culls-prevent-human-infections

mink farms, including the movement of live animals on and off the farms or animal furs destined for the marketplace.

2. **A halt to breeding programs to arrest the expansion of host animals.**

The onset of the COVID-19 virus lies in the all-too-present intersection between inhumane treatment of certain species and the transmission to humans.[3] The packed conditions, and the unyielding stress that the animals endure, almost certainly weakens their immune response and enhances the likelihood of infections. Mink are wild, semi-aquatic animals that typically roam and hunt over land areas as large as 2,500 acres.[4] The unnatural, bare wire, caged conditions that mink are subjected to on these facilities greatly increases their susceptibility to the virus as their stress levels rise and abnormal behavior such as pacing, swaying, self-mutilation, cannibalism and infanticide occurs.[5]

Continued breeding while the virus is on the move is a prescription for a major rapid spread of the virus. Shrinking numbers of mink is one essential strategy of containment. Your Department of Agriculture should immediately order mink operations to cease with any onsite breeding programs that introduce more potential disease victims into the captive farm system.

3. **Coordination with USDA officials to implement a longer-term solution.**

As nations like France and the Netherlands have recognized, the risks of mink farming exceed the economic rewards they bring to the small group of people involved in this enterprise. These countries and others grounded their decisions about a phase-out of mink farming on a careful risk assessment, and it is not a close call when the time frame for the delivery of a vaccine is uncertain. It is relevant, of course, that the commodity can readily be substituted for with human-made or natural fibers. It's also important to note that this is almost entirely a product grown for export purposes, mainly for China. We as a nation should not be engaging in enterprises with superspreader potential in order to serve a luxury market in China.

The mink industry, in relative terms, is much smaller than the industries in the Netherlands, Poland, and France. Sales are declining throughout the West as major designers and retailers are foreswearing the use of fur. Economic forecasters believe that this industry is in an inevitable decline in the United States and abroad.

We have called on the United States Department of Agriculture to implement a program that includes a buyout to phase out mink farms in the US. A buy-out is the humane thing to do for the producers, and it is the right economic and public health decision for your state. We ask

[3] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wmh3.348
[4] https://www.furfreealliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Factsheet_Animal-welfare-problems-in-fur-farming.pdf
[5] Id.

that you direct your state Department of Agriculture to reach out to USDA and help coordinate a longer-term solution to the mink farming problem.

As governor, you are making major difficult decisions every day to protect public health and the economy of your state. What we outline above are some of the reasonable and achievable steps you can take to protect your citizens from the threat that mink farming poses to both.

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

Sincerely,

Wayne Pacelle, President
Animal Wellness Action