July 25, 2024

The Honorable G.T. Thompson
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Scott
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture
1010 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Senate Committee on Agriculture
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture
555 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Thompson, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Scott, and Ranking Member Boozman:

On behalf of our members and supporters worldwide, we wish to express our deep concern about a provision in the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024 (H.R. 8467) that would earmark taxpayer dollars for the mink industry to develop and expand into international markets. Section 3201(d), which repeals part of the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 1999, seeks to direct federal dollars toward an industry that American consumers have overwhelmingly rejected, and one that scientists confirm poses a severe risk to public health. The intent of the 2024 Farm Bill is to achieve both fiscal responsibility and a commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of Americans – and Section 3201(d) is entirely counterproductive to these objectives.

Tax Dollar Waste

Mink farming is an unpopular and dying industry, with sales nosediving since well before the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the USDA, in 2017 there were 236 mink operations in the U.S. that produced about 3.3 million pelts, generating about $120 million. Seven years later, that figure has dropped to approximately 100 farms.[1] This decline is a direct result of shrinking consumer demand for real fur and a commitment by major fashion brands and retailers to go fur-free, including Nordstrom, Macy's, Bloomingdale's, Saks Fifth Avenue, Gucci, Versace, and Giorgio Armani.

According to a July 2023 USDA report, 2022 was the fur industry's worst year on record, with the value of all mink pelts produced falling to $39.2 million, a 17% reduction from 2020 (previously the worst year). Mink pelt production in 2022 also fell 6% from 2020.[2]

[1] 2022 Census of Agriculture, Table 32. *National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).* (2024, February). https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_US/usv1.pdf
[2] Mink. *National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), Agricultural Statistics Board, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).* (2023, July 14). https://downloads.usda.library.cornell.edu/usda-esmis/files/2227mp65f/1831f167v/hd76tf84r/mink0723.pdf

Cities, states, and even countries are now banning fur sales, further closing markets for fur products. In 2019, California became the first state to ban fur sales after similar local measures passed in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Berkeley and West Hollywood. In 2020, Wellesley, Massachusetts, became the first East Coast city to ban fur sales.

Public Health Hazard

Captive mink incubate diseases such as COVID-19 and avian influenza, and overcrowded, unsanitary mink fur farms create the perfect conditions for new zoonotic variants to jump to humans—with potentially devastating, wide-ranging results.

Leading scientists have concluded that mink farming poses a high risk for future viral pandemics.[3] Mink's upper respiratory tract is physiologically similar to ours, meaning they can become infected by—and potentially transmit to people—some of the same respiratory viruses as us. Mink's susceptibility to acquiring and spreading both human and animal respiratory viruses render them potentially potent "mixing vessels" for generating novel pandemic viruses.[4] Furthermore, fur farms house mink in crowded environments that create an ideal setting for pathogens to circulate among and across species.

For example, mink are highly susceptible to COVID-19, with outbreaks affecting millions of mink on more than 480 known mink fur farms across 12 countries, including the U.S. Alarmingly, mink are capable of passing a mutated form of the virus back to humans.[5] Mink-to-human transmission of the virus has been reported in at least six countries so far, including the U.S. Spillback from mink farms to humans could introduce new variants, undermining the effectiveness of vaccines and jeopardizing efforts to contain the pandemic.

In addition, a deadly avian influenza virus (H5N1), which has a 52% mortality rate in humans, has infected tens of thousands of mink on dozens of fur farms since 2022. During an October 2022 outbreak on a mink farm in Spain, the virus gained at least one mutation that favors mammal-to-mammal spread, allowing it to spread from mink to mink.[6] Scientists sounded the alarm on this H5N1 mink farm outbreak, calling it a "clear mechanism for an H5 pandemic to start" and "a warning bell."[7]

H5N1 infections were also detected at multiple mink farms in Finland in 2023,[8] demonstrating the risk for this dangerous virus to continue causing outbreaks on mink farms, each time with the possibility of mutating into something transmissible between humans.

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[3] Peacock, T. P., & Barclay, W. S. (2023). Mink farming poses risks for future viral pandemics. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 120(30). https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2303408120

[4] Sun, H., et al. (2021). Mink is a highly susceptible host species to circulating human and avian influenza viruses. Emerging Microbes & Infections, 10(1), 472–480. https://doi.org/10.1080/22221751.2021.1899058

[5] Oude Munnink, B. B., et al. (2021). Transmission of SARS-COV-2 on mink farms between humans and mink and back to humans. *Science*, *371*(6525), 172–177. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abe5901

[6] Agüero, M., et al. (2023). Highly pathogenic avian influenza A (H5N1) virus infection in farmed minks, Spain, October 2022. *Eurosurveillance*, *28*(3). https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.es.2023.28.3.2300001

[7] Kupferschmidt, K. (2023, January 24). 'Incredibly concerning': Bird flu outbreak at Spanish mink farm triggers pandemic fears. *Science.* https://www.science.org/content/article/incredibly-concerning-bird-flu-outbreak-spanish-mink-farm-triggers-pandemic-fears

[8] Lindh, E., et al. (2023). Highly pathogenic avian influenza A(H5N1) virus infection on multiple fur farms in the South and Central Ostrobothnia regions of Finland, July 2023. *Euro Surveillance, 28*(31). https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2023.28.31.2300400

In conclusion, the Farm Bill should not promote the use of taxpayer dollars to prop up the mink industry. There are clear and urgent risks to public health associated with mink farming, and American consumers have already thoroughly rejected this industry. We urge you to remove the language in Section 3201(d) from the Farm Bill.

Thank you for your attention to this crucial issue, and please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

Animal Defenders International
Animal Law & Policy Clinic, Harvard Law School
Animal Legal Defense Fund
Animal Welfare Institute
Born Free USA
Collective Fashion Justice
Conservation International
Endangered Species Coalition
Farm Transparency Project
FOUR PAWS USA
Howling For Wolves
Humane Society Legislative Fund
Humane Society Veterinary Medical Alliance
International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)
Klamath Forest Alliance
Lady Freethinker
One Health Trust
One Voice
Panoplia Laboratories
Phoenix Zones Initiative
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
Preventing Pandemics at the Source Secretariat
Re:wild
The Fur-Bearers
The Humane Society of the United States
Veterinary Association for Farm Animal Welfare (VAFAW)
We Animals
Wildlife Conservation Society
World Animal Protection

Dr. Allen Rutberg, PhD, Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy

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Dr. Joann Lindenmayer, DVM, MPH, Honorary Diplomate Association of Veterinary One Health Society, Epidemiologist

Dr. John Lieberman, MD, Infectious Diseases Physician

Dr. Jonathon Gass, MPH, PhD, Infectious Disease Epidemiologist and Virologist

Dr. Marc Bekoff, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado Boulder

Dr. Melinda Merck, DVM

Dr. Neil Vora, MD, Epidemiologist (formerly with CDC), Medical Doctor

Dr. William J. Ripple, Professor, Director of the Alliance of World Scientists

Jerry Martin, Former Director of USAID Preparedness and Response Project, Professor in Department of Infectious Disease and Global Health at Tufts University

Katrina Orsini, Textile Historian

Martin Stübler, Co-founder of BioFluff