

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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Report Name: Coronavirus Continues to Challenge Dutch Mink Farms

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Post: The Hague

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Report Highlights:

The number of Dutch mink farms which have been infected by the coronavirus rose to 27 as of July 31, 2020. While the industry is scheduled to cease operations on January 1, 2024 (pursuant to the Fur Animal Husbandry Act), the Dutch Outbreak Management Team has advised that if there are still new infections after mid-August that the Government consider cleaning up Dutch mink farms in a proactive manner (effectively ending production ahead of the 2024 deadline). The Government has said it will review whether an expedited closure of the industry is necessary, to prevent the spread of coronavirus, at year's end (before mating season begins in 2021). In the meantime, the Government continues to cull mink on infected farms and develop a program through which mink farms can voluntarily terminate their business operations sooner.

Background

In late April/early May 2020, four mink farms in the Netherlands (the world's fourth largest mink pelt producer¹) detected coronavirus (COVID-19) in their inventories. See [NL2020-0016: COVID-19 Found on Dutch Mink Farms](#). The mink showed various symptoms including respiratory and gastrointestinal problems. Based on research conducted by the Dutch government, it was subsequently determined that some of the mink which were infected with COVID-19 on two of the Dutch farms may have transmitted the virus to farm employees. The relevant study also showed that mink can have the virus without showing any disease symptoms. Based on these developments, the Minister of Agriculture, Nature, and Food Quality, Carola Schouten, and the Minister of Health, Welfare, and Sport, Hugo de Jonge, implemented a number of control measures (including screening, the use of personal protective equipment {PPE} by farm employees, a ban on visitors, and more). For additional information, see [NL2020-0019: Additional Control Measures for Dutch Mink Industry In Response to COVID-19](#).

Despite the imposition of these control measures, Dutch mink farms continue to detect COVID-19 among their populations. For additional information, see [NL2020-0024: COVID-19 Found on Additional Dutch Mink Farms](#). To control the outbreaks, the government initiated a culling program for infected farms in the interest of public and animal health. For additional information, see [NL2020-0025: Government to Cull Mink on COVID-19 Infected Farms](#).

Findings Continue on Dutch Mink Farms

By mid-July 2020, the number of mink culled in the Netherlands as a result of COVID-19 had exceeded one million.² As the number of cases continues to grow (reaching 27 infected farms as of July 31, 2020³), the public is reportedly expressing concern (even though the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment has determined the public risk of infection is negligible for people not working in the stables). For example, RTL Nieuws reports that Hubert Bruls, the mayor of Nijmegen and chairman of the National Security Council, wrote in a letter to Minister Schouten that: “{w}here the corona crisis started as a health crisis, it has increasingly become a source of social unrest and discomfort. This unrest is specific to parts of the Netherlands, which have previously been confronted with health crises in relation to livestock farming and the handling thereof. These concerns are shared by the Security Council.”⁴ NOTE: Between 2007-2010, more than 4,000 patients were diagnosed with acute Q fever caused by the bacterium *Coxiella burnetii* (a disease which was traced back to small ruminants).⁵ However, seroprevalence studies suggested that more than 40,000 people may have been infected during the outbreak.⁶

Government Discusses Whether to End Dutch Mink Farming Earlier

As previously reported, the government is currently working on a program whereby mink farms can voluntarily terminate their business operations in the short term. Pursuant to the Fur Animal Husbandry

¹ See <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/06/covid19-forces-mink-farm-end-netherlands/>

² See <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2340710-miljoen-nertsen-geruimd-maar-moeten-we-ook-gezonde-dieren-doden.html>

³ See, e.g., <https://nltimes.nl/2020/07/30/coronavirus-infection-27th-mink-farm-netherlands>

⁴ See <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/politiek/artikel/5173976/veiligheidsberaad-minister-schouten-aanpak-corona-nertsenfokkerij>

⁵ See, e.g., <https://www.rivm.nl/en/news/phd-dissertation-dutch-q-fever-epidemic-in-one-health-context>

⁶ See <https://jcm.asm.org/content/52/5/1637>

Act, Dutch fur animal owners may continue their business under certain conditions until January 1, 2024 (after which Dutch fur farming will end).⁷

Ministers de Jonge and Schouten recently asked the Zoonotic Outbreak Management Team (OMT-Z) to provide a risk assessment and advice on the persistent infections on Dutch mink farms. The OMT-Z concluded that the most likely source of contamination was frequent employee contact with kits (pups) on the farms, which had to be weaned and vaccinated in recent weeks. During that period, employees were not yet obliged to wear PPE, including non-medical masks. Although hygiene measures were tightened in mid-July,⁸ because the incubation period of the virus is several weeks, the OMT-Z expects new infections in the coming weeks (with the number of infections decreasing afterwards). The OMT-Z has, however, recommended that those farms which de-populate due to COVID-19 not repopulate their stables.

Evaluation of Dutch Mink Industry's Future May Come at Year's End

The OMT-Z also noted that if there are still new infections after mid-August, the OMT-Z advises, with the epidemiological human situation remaining unchanged, to clean up Dutch mink farms in a proactive manner (effectively ending production ahead of the 2024 deadline). The OMT-Z also says this plan must be reconsidered if human epidemiology in the Netherlands changes. Ministers Schouten and de Jonge have previously said they intend to review whether an expedited closure of the industry is necessary, to prevent the spread of COVID-19, at year's end (before mating season begins in 2021).⁹

Attachments:

No Attachments.

⁷ See <https://www.rvo.nl/onderwerpen/agrarisch-ondernemen/dieren-houden/huisdieren-houden-en-fokken/verbod-op-pelsdierhouderij>

⁸ See <https://www.nvwa.nl/onderwerpen/nertsen/documenten/dier/dierziekten/overige-dierziekten/publicaties/hygieneprotocol-bezoekers-nertsenbedrijven-28-mei-2020>

⁹ See <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/openbaar-en-dagelijks-leven/dieren/nertsen>