

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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Report Name: Government to Cull Mink on COVID-19 Infected Farms

Country: Netherlands

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Report Highlights:

After a series of coronavirus (COVID-19) detections on Dutch mink farms, the government has announced its intention to responsibly cull the inventories of the infected farms in the interest of public and animal health. While strict control measures will continue for non-infected mink farms, the government is also investigating if a one-time program can be implemented through which Dutch mink farms can voluntarily terminate their business operations in the near term.

Background

Two mink farms, located in Gemert-Bakel/Milheeze (home to 13,000 mink) and Laarbeek (home to 7,500 mink) in North Brabant province, detected coronavirus (COVID-19) in mink in late April. The mink showed various symptoms including respiratory and gastrointestinal problems. Investigations were launched to determine the source of the infections. Because some employees had COVID-19 symptoms at both farms, it was assumed that people infected the animals. The initial testing results indicated that no virus was found in the air samples outside the mink house, but the virus was found in dust particle samples taken in the immediate vicinity of mink in the house.

In early May, two additional mink farms, located in Deurne (home to 1,500 mink) and De Mortel (home to 10,000 mink) in North Brabant province, were found to have COVID-19 infections. In response, the same mitigation protocols were implemented and investigations were initiated. The Ministry reported that human-to-animal transmission does not seem to have been the only cause of the virus at these farms— noting the virus characteristics indicate transmission between mink as well. Accordingly, nearby mink farms began the process of screening animals through blood tests to see if any additional animals in the region had been infected. For additional information, see [NL2020-0016: COVID-19 Found on Dutch Mink Farms](#).

Based on research conducted by the Dutch government, it was subsequently determined that mink which were infected with COVID-19 on two 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 and the Minister of Health, Welfare, and Sport implemented a number of additional control measures. For additional information, see [NL2020-0019: Additional Control Measures for Dutch Mink Industry In Response to COVID-19](#). On May 19, 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality and the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport also mandated that Dutch mink farms subject the carcasses of naturally dead animals to laboratory testing for the presence of COVID-19, and provide blood samples to test for the presence of COVID-19 antibodies.

COVID-19 infections were subsequently identified via cadavers from three mink farms in the Netherlands (two companies in Sint Anthonis, North Brabant and another in Gemert-Bakel, North Brabant). A fourth company (in Venray, Limburg) was also suspected. For additional information, see [NL2020-0024: COVID-19 Found on Additional Dutch Mink Farms](#).

Government Response

On June 3, 2020, the government confirmed mink from the farm in Venray were found to be COVID-19 positive, and announced its intention to responsibly cull mink from all of the to-date infected farms.¹ The government commented that the virus can continue to circulate on mink farms for a significant period of time. The government also noted that some of the infected farms have early indications of additional COVID-19 infections among their mink. The government determined that the kits (i.e., baby mink) from previously infected mothers have COVID-19 antibodies that decrease over time. Accordingly, the kits will become increasingly susceptible to the COVID-19 virus in the future. As a result, the responsible culling of the infected farms will prevent a virus reservoir from developing which could endanger public health.

¹ The mink will be appraised before the culling takes place in order to determine farmer compensation. After the animals are culled, the mink houses must remain empty for a period of time before they can be disinfected.

The government also announced it is investigating if, and if so, how, a one-time program can be designed and implemented; through which Dutch mink farms can voluntarily terminate their business operations in the near term.²

Additionally, the national measures previously announced for all non-infected mink farms in the Netherlands (such as the transport ban and visitor ban in the mink houses) will continue to apply. Furthermore, existing hygiene protocols will be strengthened, frequent examination of cadavers will continue, and attention will be placed on employee testing. The Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Nature, and Food Quality has said “the expectation is that further infections will be seen in the coming weeks”³ at facilities belonging to the nation’s 150 breeders.⁴

Attachments:

[June 3 Letter to House of Representatives from Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport \(in Dutch\).pdf](#)

² NOTE: Since 2013, there has been [a ban on opening new mink farms or expanding existing operations](#) (in Dutch) in the Netherlands, and mink farming will be completely phased-out as of January 1, 2024.

³ See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-netherlands-mink/dutch-to-cull-mink-at-farms-hit-by-coronavirus-outbreak-idUSKBN23A1E7>

⁴ <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/5144946/coronavirus-nerts-ruiming-nvwa-bont-dieren-animal-rights>