

Quarantine lifted at Oregon mink farm

- By GEORGE PLAVEN Capital Press
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SALEM — The Oregon Department of Agriculture has lifted its quarantine on a mink farm where animals previously tested positive for COVID-19.

The farm, which has not been identified for privacy reasons, was initially placed under quarantine on Nov. 24 after 10 mink tested positive for the virus. A quarantine means no animal products were allowed to leave the facility.

Since then, ODA has followed up with five rounds of additional testing. Samples were sent to the USDA's National Veterinary Services Laboratory, which confirmed the last two rounds came back virus-free. ODA officially lifted the quarantine on Feb. 11.

Dr. Ryan Scholz, state veterinarian, said getting to this result involved collaboration between state and federal agencies, as well as cooperation from the farmer. He said the virus did not mutate, nor was it detected in any nearby wildlife.

"This is a best-case scenario, and we are sharing what we have learned with others," Scholz said.

Not everyone agrees.

Environmental groups opposed to fur farms have expressed concerns about the virus spilling into the wild, creating a potential reservoir for future transmission. The Center for Biological Diversity has petitioned the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to add mink to the state's prohibited species list.

A hearing on the petition is scheduled for March 19.

Lori Burd, environmental health director for the group, also criticized ODA for not sampling enough mink to justify lifting the quarantine. Rounds of testing were based on 62 samples, out of approximately 12,000 animals at the farm.

"It's disturbing that after testing no more than .5% of the animals, they rushed to lift the quarantine despite the grave implications another outbreak would pose to workers and wild animals," Burd said.

Indeed, two mink that tested positive for low levels of the virus did escape from the farm during the quarantine. They were later recaptured by USDA Wildlife Services, which was trapping and testing nearby wildlife under the direction of ODFW biologists.

No other animals tested positive for the virus outside the farm. That includes 10 opossums, three cats, two skunks and one other mink.

The USDA and CDC say there is currently no evidence that animals, including mink, play a significant role in transmitting the virus to humans. Health officials believe the mink were originally infected by other humans at the farm.

Meanwhile, Portland lawmakers have introduced a bill in the Legislature that would ban all fur sales in Oregon. House Bill 2676 states that eliminating fur sales statewide "will decrease demand for cruel products, reduce public health risks, promote community

awareness of animal welfare, foster a more humane environment and enhance the reputation of the state."

HB 2676 is sponsored by Reps. Rob Nosse, Ken Helm, Khanh Pham and Sheri Schouten, all Democrats from the Portland metro area.

The bill was referred to the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee on Jan. 19. It is not yet scheduled for any hearings.

Oregon has 11 permitted mink farms with an estimated 438,327 animals, making it the fourth-largest pelt-producing state behind Wisconsin, Utah and Idaho. Eight of Oregon's mink farms are in Marion County, one in Linn County and two in Clatsop County.

According to the industry trade group Fur Commission USA, based in Medford, Ore., the U.S. fur crop was valued at \$82.6 million in 2018, and produced 3.1 million pelts.

In a previous interview with the Capital Press, Michael Whelan, the group's executive director, said fur opponents were using the pandemic to renew their attacks on the industry.

"These small families have been raising minks for generations. ... It's unfortunate that a small sector of society wants to put them out of business," Whelan said.