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First Case of Covid-19 in a Wild Animal Found in a Utah Mink

The U.S. Department of Agriculture detected the infection while testing wild animals around a mink farm with a Covid-19 outbreak

The survey did not conclude how the wild mink became infected with the virus, but it's not unusual for captive minks to escape fur farms. (Infected mink not pictured.) (Photo Credit: Jim Barney / USFWS)

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According to an alert released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on Monday, the department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service has detected the first case of a non-captive animal infected with the coronavirus that causes Covid-19: a wild mink in Utah near a fur farm with an active virus outbreak, Lee Davidson reports for the *Salt Lake Tribune*.

The survey did not conclude how the wild mink became infected with the virus, but it's not unusual for captive minks to escape fur farms, and the virus isolated from the wild mink was indistinguishable from virus circulating in the farm. The mink was the only wild animal carrying the virus amid ongoing testing of several species that live near the farm, including raccoons and skunks, Dina Fine Maron reports for *National Geographic*.

Concern over minks' ability to escape from farms prompted fur farms across Europe to cull their mink populations. But despite outbreaks at 16 U.S. mink farms across four states, the USDA has not announced its strategy to prevent farm outbreaks from reaching wild populations.

"Outbreaks at mink farms in Europe and other areas have shown captive mink to be susceptible to SARS-CoV-2, and it is not unexpected that wild mink would also be susceptible to the virus," says USDA spokesperson Lyndsay Cole to *National Geographic*, referring to the coronavirus that causes Covid-19. "This finding demonstrates both the importance of continuing surveillance around infected mink farms and of taking measures to prevent the spread of the virus to wildlife."

Beyond minks, animals ranging from like dogs and house cats up to predators like lions, tigers and snow leopards have tested positive for the coronavirus that causes Covid-19. Scientists in the Netherlands found the first evidence of the virus in mink fur farms in May, and the disease reached fur farms in the U.S. in August.

The European fur industry has culled over 15 million minks across the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain and Greece in an effort to stymie opportunities for the virus to mutate, halt spread of the virus from minks to people working at the farm, and prevent the minks from escaping and passing the virus to wild animals.

"There is currently no evidence that SARS-CoV-2 is circulating or has been established in wild populations surrounding the infected mink farms," writes the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) in the alert.

Critics of the fur farming industry point to the case as an example of why the industry should be closed, because it is now not only an animal welfare issue—the minks are housed in crowded conditions and their genetic similarity make them prone to disease—but also a danger to wildlife.

"Scientists have worried that the coronavirus would be passed from escaped factory farmed mink to wild mink," says Lori Ann Burd, director of the Center for Biological Diversity's environmental health program, to the *Salt Lake Tribune*. "Given the risk that this nightmare scenario is unfolding in Utah, we urge officials in every state with mink

farms to take aggressive measures to ensure that this horrible disease does not decimate wildlife populations."

The Fur Commission USA, which is the primary fur trade organization in the United States, is supporting efforts to develop a vaccine to protect minks from coronavirus infections. And Mike Brown, a spokesperson for the International Fur Federation, tells *National Geographic* that U.S. fur farms follow "strict biosecurity protocols."

The case rases concerns that the virus may be able to spread among wild, non-captive mink populations, says University of Surrey veterinary expert Dan Horton to BBC News' Helen Briggs. He adds that it "reinforces the need to undertake surveillance in wildlife and remain vigilant."