

# Mink farms can be COVID-19 super spreaders

**Cathy Liss**

Guest Opinion

COVID-19 has not only hit humanity hard; it has also devastated millions of mink trapped in fur farms across the globe.

In some European countries, mutated forms of the virus that incubated among these farmed mink populations have reportedly jumped back to humans. Closer to home, COVID-19 outbreaks have been confirmed on mink farms in Oregon, Michigan, Wisconsin and Utah, infecting and killing tens of thousands of mink.

And, just in the last several months, two mink that tested positive for COVID-19 escaped their Oregon farm, raising the alarm about disease transmission to wild animals.

Recently, State Sen. Floyd Prozanski, D-Eugene, with support from the Center for Biological Diversity, introduced a bill to phase out the state's 11 permitted mink farms by the end of this year.

A public hearing before the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildlife Recovery is scheduled for April 5. If the legislation passes, Oregon would be the first state in the country to ban mink farming to protect public health. Elsewhere, California prohibited all fur sales in 2019, and lawmakers in five other states have introduced bills that would ban fur sales or production.

These local efforts should spur federal action. It is the federal government's responsibility to address the clear hazard posed by mink farms. Absent a nationwide strategy, we risk worsening the COVID-19 pandemic by introducing variants against which vaccines may be less effective, along with fostering ideal conditions for wildlife-human disease transmission that could propel the next pandemic.

Mink farms pack animals into crowded, filthy environments that create an ideal setting for pathogens to circulate among and across species. Wire cages are crammed together and often stacked on top of each other so that excrement rains down on the animals below.

The close quarters and stressful conditions cause mink to become immunocompromised, making them more susceptible to infection. Such conditions also exact a severe psychological toll, leading to destructive behaviors such as bar-biting, self-mutilation, aggression, cannibalism and infanticide. The absence of legally mandated veterinary care only compounds these problems.

As vaccine distribution ramps up across the United States and COVID-19 cases fall, the Biden administration and Congress have a duty to ensure that inhumane mink farms do not become super spreaders. A number of immediate actions are necessary.

First, mink farming operations should be phased out. Mink farmers should be fairly compensated for the closure of their businesses, enabling them to leave an industry that was in sharp decline even before the pandemic.

Second, the U.S. Department of Agriculture should require all fur farms to provide annual reports detailing their operations. Such reports should include information about the number and types of animals being raised, whether the farms are adhering to American Veterinary Medical Association guidelines governing humane euthanasia, and what steps they are taking to prevent transmission of COVID-19 among workers, captive animals and wildlife.

Finally, the USDA should regularly inspect fur farms and publish both inspection results and annual reports from these operators. These steps are necessary to bring transparency to an industry for which there is currently no federal oversight, meager state oversight and remarkably little information publicly available.

*Cathy Liss is president of the Animal Welfare Institute. You may reach her at [awi@awionline.org](mailto:awi@awionline.org)*