

The Rt. Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
10 Downing Street
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cc: Rt Hon. George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs,
Seacole Building, 2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DF

Rt Hon. Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for, Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street, London, SW1H 0EU

4th June 2021

Dear Prime Minister

Fur farming and pandemic disease risk

As veterinary surgeons, virologists, epidemiologists, infectious disease specialists and animal behaviourists, we believe that outbreaks of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, on mink fur farms in multiple countries across Europe as well as in North America, present another compelling reason for governments around the world to consider ending the farming of animals for fur.

Outbreaks of the virus on mink fur farms have been officially documented thus far in the Netherlands, Denmark, Poland, Lithuania, Greece, Spain, Sweden, France, Italy, Latvia, the United States and Canada. This is deeply concerning both from an animal health and public health perspective. Research using whole genome sequencing has concluded that a significant number of people working on fur farms have become infected with SARS-CoV-2 by mink in rare, but concerning, cases of animal to human disease transmission. It has further been shown that infection in mink can lead to mutations of the spike-proteins which, if transmitted to human populations, could potentially risk undermining the efficacy of vital vaccines.

It is clear that fur farms have the potential to act as reservoirs of SARS-CoV-2. Mink are certainly highly susceptible to this virus, but another fur-farmed species - raccoon dogs - is also capable of contracting it. Some scientists have postulated that fur farms in China, the largest fur producer in the world, could yet be implicated as having played a role in the early transmission of the virus in China, as a potential missing link. Given the scale of the industry in China, and the conditions for the animals on farms, it is at least a plausible source.

Mink are particularly susceptible to respiratory diseases. Additionally, the intensive breeding conditions typical on fur farms – animals unnaturally crowded together, poor hygiene, stress, injuries and low genetic diversity – are ideal for the creation and spread of novel pathogens. Footage taken on fur farms in countries all over the world consistently expose evidence of poor welfare conditions, and we note that fur industry certification schemes do not meaningfully improve animal welfare, nor satisfactorily address disease risk potential for live or dead animals.

Severe animal welfare deficiencies are inherent to factory fur farming, and the trade creates potential for the many tens of millions of animals on fur farms to act as immediate, intermediate or amplifier hosts for viral pathogens. Even if the immediate threat of SARS-CoV-2 abates at a later date, such as through the development of a vaccine for these species, the low welfare and high-density nature of fur farming makes this industry susceptible to other pathogens in the future. As such, the next global pandemic could well find its origins or be spread through the exploitation of animals for the production of fur. To risk jeopardising our ability to control and end this or future global coronavirus pandemics, for the sake of fur fashion production, would seem imprudent.

We therefore support the call by Humane Society International for a permanent global end to the breeding, keeping and killing of animals for the purposes of fur production, and the sale of fur.

Yours sincerely

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