



Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken

EPSCO Council 02/21/2020 Health, AOB – Mink and COVID-19

The topic we wish to raise here is that of the COVID-19 outbreaks on mink farms in the Netherlands and several other member states, and the mutations that have been found in virus isolates in Denmark. This raises concerns about possible transmission to humans and possible interference with the efficacy of the vaccines currently being developed.

In the Netherlands, the outbreaks on mink farms started with employees transmitting novel coronavirus to mink. Since then, research has shown that farmed mink have transmitted the virus to each other and, in two cases, most likely to employees as well.

Several measures have been taken in the Netherlands to address this situation, as advised by human and veterinarian experts in our Outbreak Management Team for Zoonoses.

- Mandatory screening has been carried out at all Dutch mink farms and on farms where animals infected with coronavirus were found (69 farms out of 127, all in the south of the Netherlands) all mink were culled.
- Mink at all Dutch farms are subject to serological screening and visitors are banned from visiting the sheds.
- A reporting obligation has been introduced and employees are required to use protective clothing and masks. A ban has also been imposed on the transport of mink and manure.
- The existing hygiene protocol has been tightened up, with special attention being paid to the testing of employees. There is an early warning programme (weekly submission of cadavers of animals that have died of natural causes).

Currently, further research is being done to gain more insight into the virus, its spread on mink farms and its spread in the environment.

Because of the possibility of farmed mink becoming a viral reservoir with the accompanying risk to public health, we have brought the ban on mink farming forward from 2024 to 2021. The bill to achieve this was submitted to the Dutch parliament on 16 November 2020. It is expected to enter into force before the start of the new breeding season (i.e. by March 2021 at the latest), thus preventing a repeat of the current situation in 2021.

We consider SARS-CoV-2 infection in mink an issue for the EU as a whole, not only because it poses a public health risk but also because of the possibility of the mink sector becoming a viral reservoir. This situation demands that we take precautionary measures throughout the EU and adopt a harmonised One Health approach.

We feel the urgency to address this issue here and now. In our opinion, the public health aspect is a matter of extreme importance, which therefore merits discussion in the council of health ministers. We are very interested in hearing the opinion of the Commission and of our counterparts from other member states.

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