

Honourable Harry Bains
Minister of Labour
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July 27, 2021

RE: Fur farming in British Columbia

Dear Minister Bains,

We are writing to express concerns about the problems plaguing the fur farm sector, including information from newly obtained WorkSafeBC inspection reports that show that fur farm employers have failed to protect the health and safety of their workers over the course of the pandemic.

Many workplace issues identified in these reports likely contributed to the current situation in British Columbia, where the Provincial Health Officer has recently placed a moratorium on mink farming, noting in her order that mink farming is a health hazard and endangers public health, and that there is a risk that mink infected with SARS-CoV-2 could result in the infection of mink farm workers.

COVID-19 outbreaks on BC's mink farms may have been prevented if proper protocols were in place and followed. However, WorkSafeBC inspection reports that span January 2020 – March 2021 reveal industry-wide issues of non-compliance, failures to adhere to a provincial health order, and numerous contraventions of provincial laws.

In May 2020, the Provincial Health Officer issued an order requiring that all employers in British Columbia establish and post a COVID-19 Safety Plan in accordance with the Workers Compensation Act (WCA) and Occupational Health and Safety Regulation (OHS) to protect workers and the public from contracting COVID-19. When WorkSafeBC inspected four active fur farms in July 2020, none of the employers established a COVID-19 Safety Plan, including the farm owned by the President of the British Columbia Mink Producer's Association (BCMPA).

Throughout the pandemic, WorkSafeBC officials documented numerous contraventions of the WCA and OHS across numerous fur farm employers, including the Chilliwack mink farms that experienced SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreaks among both mink and workers. Records obtained from the Ministry of Agriculture show that Temporary Foreign Workers were among those affected at the site of the first COVID-19 outbreak.

Additional issues identified by WorkSafeBC from multiple fur farms include:

- Employers failing to establish COVID-19 Safety Plans,
- Failure to demonstrate that workers were adequately trained and were following COVID-19 protocols,
- Employer failing to provide sufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to workers,
- Employer was observed not wearing PPE as required in his own written procedures,
- Workers not wearing PPE,
- No written procedures for workers to reference for handling live and dead mink in order to protect themselves from COVID-19 transmission,
- No handwashing stations, soap, or paper towels in designated areas,

- Blood and biological materials contaminating various surfaces and machinery,
- Feed carts travelling between designated zones without being disinfected,
- No consistent procedures for sanitizing machinery and tools,
- No protocols to address decontamination and absence of proper hygiene controls.

British Columbia remains the only province in Canada that has reported COVID-19 outbreaks on fur farms. This is despite an assurance made by the President of the BCMFA to Ministry of Agriculture officials in a report dated January 6, 2021, stating that: “The mink industry in B.C. takes the precaution of Public Health and the safety of staff as our top priority.”

The labour violations documented by WorkSafeBC add to a long list of problems inherent in the fur farm sector including significant animal welfare concerns and serious public health risks as identified by the World Health Organization, infectious disease specialists in British Columbia, and most recently, Dr. Bonnie Henry. Additionally, there is overwhelming opposition to fur farming from the BC public. A ban on fur farming has the support of citizens, experts, and organizations, including the BC SPCA and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

We are calling on the Ministry of Labour to step in to support BC’s fur farm workers to find safe and meaningful employment outside of the fur farm sector, particularly in sectors that are in line with BC’s climate goals and that advance food security, rather than in a sector that poses a public health threat and produces cruel and outdated products for the luxury fashion industry.

The poor working conditions in the fur farm sector for both domestic and foreign workers do not meet the standards set by the Government of British Columbia, and the unsustainability of the fur industry is contrary to the goals outlined in the Ministry of Labour’s Service Plan.

Working with your colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, we urge you to act to create a plan to phase-out fur farming and support workers in their transition to new economic opportunities.

We look forward to hearing from you and the actions the Ministry of Labour will take to help fur farm workers find safe and meaningful employment in other sectors.

Respectfully,



Lesley Fox
Executive Director
The Fur-Bearers

cc:

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