

January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Hon. Lana Popham  
Minister of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries

Hon. Katrine Conroy  
Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development

Dear Ministers Popham and Conroy:

**RE: Ending Mink Farming in British Columbia**

We are writing as scientists deeply concerned about the mink farming industry in British Columbia. Our concerns with this practice include:

1. Mink farms are risking the spread and mutation of SARS-CoV-2 among people.
2. Mink farms risk wildlife populations.
3. Mink farming raises serious animal welfare concerns.

With public opinion strongly opposed to fur farming<sup>1</sup>, we believe it is time to bring about legislation to phase out fur farming in our province.

**Mink farms are risking the spread and mutation of SARS-CoV-2 among people:**

There has been a major increase in emerging infectious diseases (particularly zoonoses) in the last century, related to changes in human population density and the increase in human-wildlife interaction, including intensive farming of wild and domesticated animals<sup>2 3</sup>. Wet markets in Asia have demonstrated how concentrations of stressed wildlife with viruses in close contact with the public can result in zoonotic spread resulting in a deadly pandemic. Now, in British Columbia, dozens of workers and hundreds of animals have contracted and become sick from the SARS-CoV-2 virus, bringing this issue full-circle. Mink are particularly susceptible to this virus, with severe symptoms<sup>4</sup>. Not only have outbreaks on mink farms across the globe led to substantial animal suffering, but they have also increased the reservoir size for this virus, increasing the risk of mutations and spread back to humans and other wildlife. Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, has expressed that the SARS-CoV-2 virus on mink farms is of "great concern."

The dangers of keeping wild animals in captivity in crowded conditions in close proximity to people and domesticated animals should be all too clear given the virus's origins. Recent international outbreak reports from the World Health Organization have supported a "One Health" approach, acknowledging that the spread of SARS-CoV-2 on mink farms has the potential to impact not only mink but also the people who work with them, their families, and our communities.

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<sup>1</sup> 85% of British Columbians in a 2019 poll by Research Co. opposed killing animals for their fur:

<https://researchco.ca/2019/11/22/animals-canada>

<sup>2</sup> Jones et al (2008). Global trends in emerging infectious diseases. *Nature*. [www.nature.com/articles/nature06536](http://www.nature.com/articles/nature06536)

<sup>3</sup> Parrish et al (2008). Cross-Species Virus Transmission and the Emergence of New Epidemic Diseases. *Microbiol Mol Biol Rev*. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2546865](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2546865)

<sup>4</sup> Shau et al (2020). Replication, pathogenicity, and transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in minks. *National Science Review* [academic.oup.com/nsr/advance-article/doi/10.1093/nsr/nwaa291/6027464](http://academic.oup.com/nsr/advance-article/doi/10.1093/nsr/nwaa291/6027464)

Keeping native wildlife in captivity is strictly prohibited by the *BC Wildlife Act*, with an exception granted for the fur industry to operate under the Animal Health Act and its *Fur Farm Regulation*. We request that BC revisit this exception to reduce the risks of high density wild-animal farming, which poses direct dangers to the animals themselves and increases the chance of diseases spreading between species.

The BC fur industry does nothing to improve our food security, a clear priority for Premier Horgan's government. It is difficult to understand why mink production qualifies as farming in BC while raising exotic animals is excluded from the province's definition of farming under the *Farm Practices Protection (Right to Farm) Act*. Ownership of exotic species is also appropriately restricted under the *BC Alien Species Regulation*. Why are mink producers permitted to keep these wild animals in captivity when other BC laws prohibit this practice both for native and exotic wildlife?

### **Mink farms are risking wildlife populations:**

The news of an infected mink escaping a quarantined Oregon farm recently<sup>5</sup> demonstrated how easily captive mink have the opportunity to infect native wildlife. The implications for native wildlife are troubling.

The BC Government's *Together for Wildlife* strategy aims to "ensure wildlife and their habitats are resilient to change". This strategy involves "managing key threats to wildlife and habitats, including invasive species, interspecies interactions, and disease." If the potential for native wildlife to contract SARS COV-2 from infected mink on farms as seen in the US already does not qualify as a disease threat to these populations, we cannot imagine what would.

Beyond the largely unknown risk of sickness and mortality due to infection with SARS-CoV-2, infected wild animal populations are also at risk of becoming targets for culling to reduce the chance of re-transmission to humans or farmed animals.

Given that the rapid and uncontrolled spread of SARS-CoV-2 among mink farms here and elsewhere has not been halted by enhanced biosecurity measures, even with ample warning to prepare the industry, it is time for decisive measures to prevent farmed mink from becoming a lasting reservoir for the virus.

### **Mink farming poses serious animal welfare concerns:**

Mink are highly intelligent animals who typically roam, swim, and forage over a large territory. Confining wild, far-ranging, solitary, and semi-aquatic carnivorous animals to small cages causes them extreme stress and frustration, as measured in numerous scientific studies<sup>6</sup>. While Canadians are quick to condemn other cultures for their animal welfare practices, such as selling wildlife at wet markets, British Columbian fur farms are raising mink under similar conditions.

Mink producers are now trying to have their national industry Codes of Practice further weakened to continue housing animals in dense confinement. Canada's current Code of Practice for mink farming requires slightly larger cages by 2023, but even this meager improvement is being fought by an industry that is also requesting

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<sup>5</sup> <https://odanews.wpengine.com/mink-at-affected-oregon-farm-negative-for-sars-cov-2-wildlife-surveillance-continues>

<sup>6</sup> Nimon and Broom (1999). The welfare of farmed mink (*Mustela vison*) in relation to housing and management: a review. *Animal Welfare*. [www.researchgate.net/publication/233679001](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/233679001)

permission to return to killing their animals with vehicle exhaust. The industry is a reputational risk to the farming sector and is opposed by an overwhelming majority of British Columbians.

Our call to action is not in contempt of mink farm operators as individuals; instead, it is a call to action to end a practice we have outgrown as a society. We no longer allow animal fighting, the keeping of whales or dolphins in captivity, or the gratuitous hunting of grizzly bears due to evolving public values. On mink farming, British Columbians are also clear: they don't want this industry. Rather than find ways to continue to justify and support this industry, let's help the farm operators Build Back Better by supporting a reinvention of their businesses into activities that hold a social license in our province.

It is time for British Columbia to join the UK, Japan, and 11 other countries that have done so already. We jointly call on you as leaders elected by British Columbians to enact policy that reduces the risks of disease transmission between humans and wildlife and that reflects the values of BC citizens by eliminating fur farming in this province.

Sincerely,



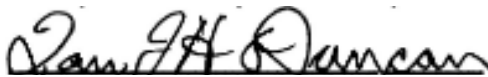
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Daniel Coombs, PhD,  
Professor, Mathematics, University of British  
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Sarah Otto, PhD  
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Ian Duncan, PhD, Professor Emeritus in Animal  
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David Suzuki, PhD, CM, OBC, FRSC  
Professor Emeritus, University of British Columbia

CC:

Hon. Adrian Dix, BC Minister of Health

Dr. Bonnie Henry, Provincial Health Officer