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CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 UPDATE (363): ANIMAL, DENMARK (NORTH JUTLAND) NETHERLANDS (NORTH BRABANT, LIMBURG) MINK, SPREAD

A ProMED-mail post

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International Society for Infectious Diseases

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[1] Denmark (North Jutland): 4th mink farm positive for SARS-CoV-2

Date: Fri 14 Aug 2020

Source: Danish Ministry of the Environment and Food, press release [in Danish, machine trans., edited]

<https://www.foedevarestyrelsen.dk/Nyheder/Aktuelt/Sider/Pressemeddelelser%202020/Fjerde-minkfarm-smittet-med-COVID19.aspx>

4th mink farm infected with COVID-19

The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration is currently testing all Danish mink farms for COVID-19. This is done as part of the government's strategy to ensure close COVID-19 monitoring of the farms.

The 1st 925 mink farms were tested without COVID-19 being found. On Friday [14 Aug 2020], afternoon however, the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration was able to ascertain COVID-19 in a mink farm in Hjørring Municipality.

This is the 4th mink farm to be found positive for COVID-19. All 4 mink farms are located in North Jutland.

"To avoid infection outside the farm, the infected mink farm is now subject to strict restrictions. This means, among other things, that visitors must wear a special mask and that you must take a shower and wash your clothes after entering the farm," says Nikolas Hove, emergency manager at the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration.

He says that the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration has also gone through the mink farm's enclosure to minimize the risk of mink escaping. The mink owner must also regularly count his mink to document that none have run away.

After the 1st finds of COVID-19 in Danish mink in June [2020], the government decided to set strict requirements for infection protection on all approximately 1200 mink farms in Denmark. For example, everyone today must wear a face mask when inside a mink farm, and mink owners must make a detailed plan for infection protection.

With the new intensified measures, the government assesses that it is justifiable to let infected mink herds live, as the risk of infection spreading is minimized.

Timeline

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- In June [2020], the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration found 3 mink farms infected with COVID-19. In August [2020], a 4th farm was found positive for COVID-19.
 - In June [2020], COVID-19 was made notifiable for mink. This means that mink owners and practicing veterinarians have a duty to contact the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration if they suspect that their animals may be infected.
 - In June [2020], the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration conducted a random survey of 10% of Danish mink farms. None of the 125 mink herds examined were infected with COVID-19. Since then, the government has adopted a new monitoring program of all Danish mink farms.
 - In July [2020], the government decided, as part of the strategy for managing COVID-19 in mink farms, that all mink owners must use protective equipment and have a duty to prepare a detailed plan for infection protection against COVID-19.
 - The test results of the country's mink farms are evaluated when all mink herds have been tested twice.

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[In June [2020], the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration reported infection with SARS-CoV-2 in 3 mink farms. A stamping-out policy was applied for the 3 1st infected farms. More information can be found at (https://www.oie.int/fileadmin/Home/MM/Update_1_Letter_to_OIE_about_the_COVID-19_situation_in_Denmark.pdf). The stamping out policy won't be applied for the 4th infected farm as announced by the government. - Mod.SF

HealthMap/ProMED map of Denmark: <https://promedmail.org/promed-post?place=7687830,16381>

[2] Netherlands (North Brabant & Limburg): a total of 33 infected mink farms

Date: Mon 17 Aug 2020

Source: DutchNews [edited]

<https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2020/08/coronavirus-found-on-more-mink-farms-pressure-mounts-on-minister-to-close-them-all/>

Coronavirus has been found on several more Dutch mink farms over the weekend [15-16 Aug 2020], taking the total to 33. So far, some 1.5 million mink have been culled because of coronavirus [SARS-CoV-2], representing some 30% of the animals kept on the country's 128 mink farms. The fur industry is due to be phased out by 2024, but pressure is mounting on farm minister Carola Schouten to order a preventative cull across the entire sector now. Mink are known to have passed the virus on to at least 2 farm workers.

Schouten has said she wants to wait for new recommendations from the government's Outbreak Management Team [OMT] before taking a decision. But that advice is not expected before the end of the month [August 2020].

"Everyone is surprised that it is taking so long," Jan van Hoof, director of Mens, Dier & Peel, which campaigns against livestock farming in the Peel district, told the Volkskrant "Economic interests are still being placed ahead of public health. This is what happened with Q fever." Q fever is a disease that can be transmitted to humans from animals, often goats. An outbreak of Q fever in the Netherlands in 2007 led to an estimated 10 000 infections among humans and 74 deaths.

Two vets, who were also active during the Q fever crisis, have also written to Schouten urging her to order a cull, warning of the "potential risk" that mink farm owners and workers could spread the virus further.

In June [2020], MPs voted in favour of a ban on further mink breeding and called for funding to help farmers close down their businesses ahead of schedule. The OMT in July [2020] also advised the cabinet to clear all mink farms if new infections were found later than mid-August [2020].

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[3] Netherlands (North Brabant & Limburg): a total of 33 infected mink farms

Date: Mon, 17 Aug 2020

Source: Trouw [Dutch, transl, edited]

<https://www.trouw.nl/duurzaamheid-natuur/besmetting-nertsen-houdt-niet-op-maar-ze-zijn-geen-coronabrandhaard~b98a9d7f/>

It was a powerful promise: if minks are still infected with Covid-19 after mid-August [2020], all breeding farms must be cleared. The counter is now at 33, after 2 more infected mink holdings were added last weekend: a breeding farm with 700 mother animals in De Mortel (North Brabant province) and one with 8000 mother animals in Ottersum (Limburg province). Nevertheless, the chance that preventive culling will occur now is small.

"Look at RIVM's Corona map," [link in the commentary] says Arjan Stegeman, professor of veterinary medicine at Utrecht University. "The trouble spots we have seen developing in recent weeks are not around mink farms. It is actually clean there".

Public health is therefore not in immediate danger, nor is animal health, apart from the mink itself. And that is one of the 2 conditions set in the advice that the Outbreak Management Team Zoonosen (OMT-Z) issued on [17 Jul 2020] to ministers Hugo de Jonge (Public Health) and Carola Schouten (Agriculture). The other condition, that there is an increased risk of infection, is not in itself sufficient to proceed with large-scale culling. "The people who work on the mink farms run an increased risk of contamination. But not outside of that", explains Stegeman, who is vice-chairman of OMT-Z.

Still, the persistent corona infestation of mink is cause for concern. "It is frustrating that it is still going on", says Stegeman. "We assumed a hypothesis of increased activity on the farms: mating in March, the puppies in May, vaccination [see Q&A further] of the puppies in June and weaning. We would have liked to see a decrease from mid-July, but that is not the case. All hygienic measures, mouth masks and the transport ban, apparently do not help".

At the end of last year [2019], the Netherlands still had 128 mink farms; they must all be gone by 2024. It is striking that the virus only appears at farms in the south of the country. "Things are going like wildfire below the rivers, above the rivers there is still no contamination", says Stegeman. He thinks that this is due to the clustering of employees. "Above the rivers they are mostly small businesses, run by only one family".

At the same time as the tightening of the hygiene rules, a month ago, an in-depth investigation was started into the causes of

the contamination. This investigation addresses also other animals, such as stray cats, rats and birds, that may have displaced the mink's feed or manure and thus spreading the virus. For Stegeman, people remain the most important source. "Two infected cats were found in the beginning, but not after that. There are also a few known cases of contamination of humans by mink, but it is usually the other way around".

Now that the hypothesis of increased activity does not seem to be correct, the question is whether the contamination will stop. "It stops because the number of mink farms is limited", Stegeman concludes dryly. "That is why it is not wise to repopulate cleared companies. I understand the farmers who want that, they are entrepreneurs. So there must be a good stoppers scheme".

The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Safety has announced that this scheme will be worked out in the coming weeks. "It is important that the scheme complies with EU state aid conditions and that it is attractive enough for fur farmers to be used," said the spokesman

[Byline: Onno Havermans]

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[The mentioned Dutch Corona map, presenting the officially reported human cases in the Netherlands, is maintained by RIVM (National Institute of Public Health and the Environment, Bilthoven). The most recent updated version, covering the period between 19 Jul and 11 Aug 2020, is available at <https://www.rivm.nl/coronavirus-covid-19/actueel> (next update, Tue 18 Aug 2020). The map presents the number and the 1:100 000 rate for each infected municipality. Limburg is the most southern Dutch province; North Brabant neighbors Limburg on its north-west (map of provinces at <https://tinyurl.com/y4ez4p4b>). - Mod.AS]

[4] COVID-19 in Dutch minks, official updated Q&A

Date: Mon, 17 Aug 2020

Source: Dutch government [in Dutch, trans. Mod.AS, abridged, edited]

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/openbaar-en-dagelijks-leven/dieren/nertsen>

Questions about mink and the coronavirus

Q. How many farms has the virus been found?

A. The virus was found on 33 mink farms in North Brabant and Limburg: 11 in Gemert-Bakel, 9 in Sint Anthonis, 4 in Venray, 2 in Laarbeek, 1 in Deurne, 1 in Uden, 1 in Nederweert, 1 in Boxmeer, 2 in Gennep and 1 in West Maas and Waal.

Q. How did the mink get infected?

A. This is currently being investigated further. The most likely route of infection is from humans to animals. A number of companies employed persons who had COVID-19 symptoms. At other companies it is not yet clear how the infection took place. And in some cases, the source can no longer be traced. In addition to the standard research of the NVWA and GGD, the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine [Utrecht] is conducting more extensive research into the possible contamination routes at the request of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality.

Q. Precautions apply to mink farms. How could new infections be found?

A. Experts indicate that the mink were likely infected by employees. In recent weeks, employees have had intensive contact with the mink, because the puppies had to be weaned (taken away from the mother) and vaccinated [against mink diseases].

Since 10 Jul 2020, employees have been obliged to wear mouth masks and face shields. Therefore, there has been a chance that they have infected the mink with the virus during weaning and vaccination. Weaning and vaccination is now almost complete. It is possible that up to mid-August [2020], infections may come to light that occurred during these activities. This is because it takes a while before the effect of the extra hygiene measures can be determined.

Q. What will the government do now that more and more infections are occurring?

A. The animal diseases expert group and OMT-Z were asked in July to look at the risks to animal and public health. The OMT-Z assessed in an opinion on [17 July 2020] that the risk to public health is no greater than on [3 June 2020], when they recommended that the contaminated companies be culled. They recommended keeping proper records of visitors and ensuring strict compliance with all measures. OMT-Z also recommended testing employees without complaints. This advice will be further elaborated in collaboration with the GGD.

If there are still new infections after mid-August [2020], the OMT-Z advised preventive culling of mink farms, provided that the situation with the spread of the virus among humans is comparable to mid-July [2020]. At that time, the number of diagnosed infections among humans was low.

The OMT-Z also stated that if the situation with the spread of the virus among people in the Netherlands changes, this will have to be reconsidered. The cabinet takes this advice as a starting point. The government is now awaiting a new OMT-Z follow-up advice to further examine the risk assessment and appropriate effective measures in the light of public health.

Q. How did the infections from mink to humans occur?

A. The infections took place on mink farms where mink was infected with SARS-CoV-2. The employees concerned worked among the minks in the period when it was not yet known that the minks on the farm were infected. At that time there was no advice on personal protective equipment.

Q. How have mink to humans been diagnosed?

A. Researchers have compared the genetic code of the viruses found in mink with the genetic code of the viruses found among the employees of the infected mink farms, and a virus family tree made. From this, a picture could be obtained of the way in which people and animals have been contaminated in time and place. On the basis of this it was concluded that 2 employees of the infected mink farms probably contracted the virus from mink.

Q. Do infected mink farms pose a risk to public health?

A. Experts assess that there is no increased risk to public health outside the infected farms. Only people who come into an infected shed are at risk of being infected by the mink. Research shows that the virus has not spread to the environment from the infected companies. To prevent the virus from circulating on the farms for a long time, all infected farms are cleared.

Q. Should people living in the vicinity of the infected companies be concerned?

A. There is no reason to believe that the virus will spread over greater distances. The virus has not been found in air samples taken outside the stables of infected farms. Research shows that the virus has not spread to the environment from the infected companies.

Q. What measures does the government take on the infected farms?

A. Research on the first 5 infected farms showed that the virus can continue to circulate on the farms for a long time. This is undesirable from a public health point of view. That is why all infected companies are cleared.

Q. Can't we wait for the virus to die out on the farms?

A. Mink farming has an annual cycle, in which the puppies are born in the spring. When the first infections were found on mink farms, few or no puppies had been born on many farms. Meanwhile, the minks have thrown at all farms. As a result, there are now 5 to 6 times as many animals on the farm as at the start of the infection. This can infect many more animals and create a 2nd wave of infections. Because there are more susceptible animals, it can take much longer for this 2nd wave to wear out and a lot more virus may be released. The chance that contaminated farms will be a source of new infections of humans and

animals will increase. The government wants to prevent that.

Q. What is the government doing to detect new infections?

A. All mink companies in the Netherlands are monitored in 3 ways:

- Via an obligation to report: Mink farmers, research institutions and veterinarians are obliged to report symptoms that could indicate a SARS-CoV-2 infection in mink, such as respiratory problems and increased mortality, to the national animal diseases reporting center (telephone number 0455463188).
- Via an early warning: All mink farms are obliged to send in cadavers of naturally dead animals every week. This allows any new infections to be detected quickly.
- Via screening: Blood samples are taken from all mink farms and tested for the presence of SARS-CoV-2.

A total of 22 of the 31 infected companies were traced via the early warning [the mode of detection in the 2 recent outbreaks, Nos 32 and 33, has not yet been disclosed. - Mod.AS]; 8 infected companies were discovered via reports; 1 infection was discovered after testing puppies for transport to another location. Since 10 Jul 2020, growing puppies may be moved to vacant (not previously cleared) locations. This is allowed with a view to animal welfare and under strict conditions. Before transport, the puppies are tested for SARS-CoV-2. Read more about transport to other locations under the question 'Are minks still being transported, despite the transport ban?'.

Q. What measures does the government take on non-infected mink farms?

A. In addition to the reporting obligation, early warning and screening, a number of precautions apply to all mink farms:

- a transport ban for mink and mink manure;
- a hygiene protocol for visitors and means of transport;
- a ban on visitors for the stable;
- an obligation to ensure that cats and dogs cannot leave the holding or enter the accommodation;
- an urgent advice that employees with complaints appropriate to COVID-19 do not come into contact with the mink, do not enter the stable and have themselves tested.

The hygiene protocol for mink farmers has been tightened up. The hygiene protocol can be found on the website of the NVWA. Mink company employees are required to use face masks and face shields. In addition, mink farmers must follow a webinar of the Animal Health Service about the hygiene measures.

Q. Are minks still being transported, despite the transport ban?

A. During this time of the year the puppies are weaned and taken away from their mother. On some non-infected farms there is no housing for weaned puppies at the location where the puppies were born. Normally these puppies are moved to different locations, often managed by the same owner. When these puppies have to stay on these farms because of the transport ban, a major animal welfare problem arises. To solve this problem, the puppies must be transported to another location. The NVWA can grant an exemption to companies affected by this problem. Transport of the puppies to another location is then permitted, provided additional protection measures are taken.

Q. Is the phasing out of mink farms in the Netherlands now being accelerated?

A. Mink farmers had to stop before 2024. Given the current circumstances, it is conceivable that a mink farmer would want to give up keeping mink early. The cabinet is investigating whether and, if so, how, a one-off stopping scheme can be designed with which these mink farmers can voluntarily end their business operations in the short term.

Q. Why is there no breeding ban on mink?

A. A breeding ban doesn't make much sense now. The animals have just given birth and will not be mated again until next year. At the end of 2020, it will be decided whether a breeding ban is necessary to limit risks to public and animal health.

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[So far, COVID-19 has been reported in minks from 3 countries: Netherlands, Denmark and Spain. In view of the high susceptibility of this species to infection, although mostly subclinical, active surveillance in farmed minks is warranted.

Information on the COVID-19 situation in minks is of particular importance in China, one of the 2 leading mink producers, globally (the other one is Denmark). Since infections could have taken place in any point in time, this would require the surveillance to be serological.

For updated, exhaustive information on China's mink industry, subscribers are referred to <https://www.actasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/China-Fur-Report-7.4-DIGITAL-2.pdf>.

So far, infection by SARS-CoV-2 has been confirmed in carnivores of 3 families, canids (dogs), felids (cats, tigers, lions, puma), and mustelids (ferrets, minks). Infection in cats and ferrets has been confirmed experimentally, whereas the virus was shown to replicate poorly in dogs following inoculation. Ferrets are used as laboratory animals and as pets. - Mod.AS

HealthMap/ProMED maps:

Denmark: <https://promedmail.org/promed-post?place=7687830,111>

Netherlands: <https://promedmail.org/promed-post?place=7687830,104>

See Also

COVID-19 update (340): animal, China, envir monitoring, Netherlands (NB), mink 20200801.7635820
 COVID-19 update (334): animal, Netherlands, mink, spread, UK, cat, 1st rep, OIE 20200727.7617582
 COVID-19 update (324): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, spread 20200719.7591013
 COVID-19 update (317): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, spread 20200716.7578453
 COVID-19 update (307): Netherlands (NB), Denmark (ND) farmed mink, spread, control 20200708.7553067
 COVID-19 update (301): Denmark (ND) Netherlands (NB) farmed mink, spread, control 20200703.7536980
 COVID-19 update (284): Denmark (ND) animal, farmed mink, spread, dog 20200624.7506728
 COVID-19 update (281): Netherlands (NB, LI) farmed mink, spread, animal, global 20200623.7502849
 COVID-19 update (266): Denmark (ND) animal, farmed mink, 1st rep 20200617.7479510
 COVID-19 update (251): Netherlands (NB, LI) animal, farmed mink, spread, culling 20200610.7453845
 COVID-19 update (248): Netherlands (NB, LI) animal, mink, spread, culling, cat 20200609.7446478
 COVID-19 update (236): Netherlands (NB, LI) animal, farmed mink, spread, culling 20200604.7427849
 COVID-19 update (230): Netherlands (NB, LI) animal, farmed mink, spread, control 20200602.7420433
 COVID-19 update (215): Netherlands (NB) animal, mink-to-human, epidem., control 20200527.7385049
 COVID-19 update (209): Netherlands (NB) farmed mink, animal-to-human, cat, epid 20200525.7375359
 COVID-19 update (198): Netherlands (NB) farmed mink, animal-to-human infect susp 20200520.7359976
 COVID-19 update (189): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, research, cat, dog 20200517.7344274
 COVID-19 update (177): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, Spain (CT) cat susp 20200512.7328587
 COVID-19 update (174): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, comment 20200511.7323845
 COVID-19 update (169): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, spread, rabbit susp 20200509.7316646
 COVID-19 update (154): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, research 20200503.7294846
 COVID-19 update (146): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, epidemiology 20200501.7286113
 COVID-19 update (135): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink 20200427.7272289

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