

Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

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Subject Status of the research into COVID-19 on mink farms

Dear Chairman,

In recent weeks we have informed the House on several occasions about the COVID-19 situation on mink farms and the measures we have taken to minimise the risks to human and animal health. We are now writing to inform you about an additional three mink farms where SARS-CoV-2 infections have been confirmed and about a suspected outbreak at another farm. We will explain how this will affect the next steps.

Compulsory testing on all mink farms

On 19 May 2020 the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality designated SARS-CoV-2 as an infectious animal disease and announced compulsory testing on all mink farms. There are two types of checks involved. First of all we are carrying out early warning testing. Until further notice all mink farms are required on a weekly basis to send in the carcasses of animals that died of natural causes. These carcasses will undergo pathological and laboratory tests (PCR) to establish the presence of SARS-CoV-2. This early warning testing began last week. By the end of this week all mink farms will have sent in their carcasses for the first round of weekly testing.

We are also carrying out screening, which involves collecting blood samples at all mink farms on a one-off basis. In the laboratory these blood samples are screened for antibodies using an ELISA test. If antibodies are found it means that particular farm has been or possibly still is infected with SARS-CoV-2. In the latter case additional testing is required to confirm the ongoing infection. By the end of this week samples will have been collected at all farms. The ELISA test is currently being adapted to analyse blood samples from mink. If this proceeds as scheduled, we can expect the first test results by the end of this week and the screening results for all mink farms in the course of next week.

First results of early warning testing

At the end of last week animal health service Royal GD reported that SARS-CoV-2 had been found in carcasses from three of the approximately 50 mink farms examined to date as part of the early warning testing. To officially confirm suspected outbreaks, the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) collects official samples, which are then analysed at the National Reference Laboratory at Wageningen Bioveterinary Research (WBVR). Yesterday the WBVR confirmed the presence of the virus at the three farms in question. Two of the farms are located in the municipality of Sint Anthonis and the other is located in the municipality of Gemert-Bakel. At the weekend a suspected outbreak was reported at a fourth farm, in the municipality of Venray. This fourth farm is being inspected today and the results for this particular case will be announced on Tuesday 2 June.

Strict veterinary measures already apply to these four farms. These precautionary measures were introduced on 28 May 2020 for all mink farms in the Netherlands, pending the screening results for all such farms. We informed you of these measures in our letter of 28 May. They are as follows:

- a ban on transporting mink and mink manure;
- a hygiene protocol for visitors and vehicles;
- a ban on visitors to mink sheds (fewer persons are allowed to enter the sheds);
- mink farm owners must ensure, as far as possible, that other animals (dogs, cats and ferrets) do not leave or enter the farm.

The National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) has indicated that the correct and consistent use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in infected mink sheds can prevent transmission. The use of PPE is also advised at the farms in question, i.e. where infections have been confirmed or are suspected.

Concerns

There are concerns about public health risks in the municipalities where infected mink farms are located. As indicated in our letter of 28 May we understand these concerns and are therefore in frequent contact with local and regional authorities to ensure that they receive prompt and detailed information on the situation and that their questions are answered as accurately as possible. The RIVM assesses the risk to people living near infected farms as negligible and states that proper use of PPE in mink sheds on infected farms can prevent transmission of the virus to workers. How the risk to public health will develop over time depends on whether mink could become a permanent source of infection or reinfection for humans and animals. An epidemiological investigation into this question has been carried out at the first three infected locations.

Next steps

Based on the results of this epidemiological investigation, at the end of last week the Expert Group on Animal Diseases made a veterinary assessment of the likelihood that SARS-CoV-2 will continue to circulate at infected mink farms which, over time, could become a permanent source of infection and reinfection for humans and animals. On the basis of this assessment, experts in human and veterinary medicine will convene a meeting of the OMT-Z (Outbreak Management Team for Zoonoses) this week to determine the risk to human health. Based on the OMT-Z's assessment and advice, we will decide on the measures necessary to

eliminate potential risks. Every conceivable measure will be considered, including the option of culling mink at the infected farms. We will provide further information to the House no later than Thursday 4 June.

Yours sincerely,

the minister of Health, Welfare and
Sport,

the minister of Agriculture, Nature
and Food Quality,

Hugo de Jonge

Carola Schouten