

## Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

> P.O. Box 20350 2500 EJ The Hague The Netherlands

De Voorzitter van de Tweede Kamer  
der Staten-Generaal  
Binnenhof 4  
2513 AA DEN HAAG

**Address for visitors:**  
Parnassusplein 5  
2511 VX Den Haag  
The Netherlands  
T +31 (0)70 340 79 11  
F +31 (0)70 340 78 34  
www.rijksoverheid.nl

**Postal address:**  
P.O. Box 20350  
2500 EJ Den Haag

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Subject National measures on mink farms

Dear Chairman,

As announced in our letter of 25 May, we are writing to inform you about supplementary measures to be taken on mink farms to prevent any possible spread of SARS-CoV-2. These measures will apply to all mink farms in the Netherlands, not just those that have been found to be infected. In this letter we also urgently advise mink farm workers with any symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 to have themselves tested, and we provide further guidance on what they should do. Finally, we inform you about the process of interpreting and drawing conclusions about the results of the investigation at the infected farms in terms of human and animal health, on the basis of which we will take all measures necessary to eliminate any risks to public health.

### **National measures**

In our letter of 19 May, we informed the House that all mink farms would undergo compulsory serological screening for SARS-CoV-2 in view of the possibility of subclinical infection (i.e. infection without symptoms). The screening started this week. Screening of farms in the area surrounding the infected farms had already started earlier. Pending the results of this screening, additional precautionary veterinary measures will apply to all mink farms in the Netherlands as of today, in addition to the existing measures at infected mink farms. The measures are:

- 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.

### **Testing of mink farm workers with symptoms suggestive of COVID-19**

It has now been established that mink can become infected with coronavirus. We therefore urgently advise mink farmers and farm workers with symptoms suggestive of COVID-19, and members of their households with such symptoms, to contact the municipal health service (GGD) for testing. They should not enter mink sheds until such time as their test results show them to be negative for COVID-19. If a mink farm owner, worker or a member of their household tests positive for coronavirus, the GGD will advise the infected individual, as part of

contact tracing, on the measures to prevent the further spread of infection. Infected individuals must self-isolate at home, along with members of their household. It is important that they do not come into contact with the mink, which should be looked after by other farm workers in such cases. If this is impossible, the advice is for non-infected members of the household to take care of the animals, wearing personal protective equipment (PPE). The GGD and the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) can advise on the procedure to be followed, as well as on PPE.

### **Parliamentary motion by Esther Ouwehand**

The House has requested that we respond to the motion by Esther Ouwehand (subsequently adopted by the House) requesting that the government give the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport the authority to take measures beyond his own remit in relation to the prevention and control of contagious animal diseases constituting a threat to public health, something the government has hitherto been unwilling to do.

We advised against this motion, but we fully endorse the notion that public health is paramount.

We have already set up a zoonotic disease crisis response mechanism with effect from Monday 25 May. It is led by the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport. That minister takes decisions jointly with the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, with the principal aim of protecting public health. Such decisions could relate to measures to protect not only public health, but also animal health. In our view, this mechanism ensures that the protection of public health is the guiding principle and aim of all measures taken. In this way, we have already taken steps to implement the above-mentioned motion.

### **Export**

At Prime Minister's question time on 26 May, an undertaking was given to provide more detailed information about the export of mink. According to the NVWA's export data, no mink were exported to countries outside the European Union this year. It is not known whether mink from the Netherlands were traded with parties in other EU member states, given that such trade is not certifiable under EU law and is not registered in Traces.

### **Concerns**

There are concerns about public health risks in the municipalities where infected mink farms are located. We understand these concerns and are 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 National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (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 is being carried out at the first three infected locations.

### **Next steps**

The epidemiological investigation at the first three infected locations will be concluded this week. Based on the results, the Expert Group on Animal Diseases will make 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) next 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. We will inform the House of the outcome as soon as possible next week. Our aim is to write to you 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