

Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

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Subject SARS-CoV-2 infections in mink and related matters

Dear Chairman,

We are writing to inform you about various matters relating to SARS-CoV-2 infections in farmed mink. We provide information on the new outbreaks, the results of screening, our continued monitoring of mink farms and the way we have dealt with some problems on farms. We also summarise feedback from the Animal Diseases Welfare Committee on how the culls have been carried out. Lastly, we examine the latest findings of research on the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 in farmed rabbits and report on the undertaking to investigate the role of vitamin D.

Update on COVID-19 outbreaks at mink farms

Unfortunately, despite all the measures taken, new outbreaks on mink farms have been confirmed in the past week. One farm in Landhorst tested positive on 2 July 2020, two in Gemert (Brabant) on 4 and 5 July, and on 9 July one in Ospel and another in Vredepeel (both Limburg), bringing the current total of mink farms with confirmed outbreaks to 22.

The outbreak in Landhorst was discovered after mink were reported to have symptoms, i.e. under the notification requirement, and the farm was depopulated on 3 July. Workers on the farm also had COVID-19 symptoms. The two outbreaks in Gemert were detected through the early warning (EW) system, under which mink farm owners have to send in carcasses every week. Both holdings are owned by the same person and were depopulated on 6 and 7 July. The farm in Ospel was identified through EW testing and through notification. The outbreak on the farm in Vredepeel was also ascertained through the EW system. The owner of this farm previously had an outbreak on another holding. Both of these infection sites are located outside the area where most outbreaks have occurred to date.

The Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) and the municipal health service (GGD) are tracing the source of infection on all infected farms. In the recent cases, no likely introduction route has yet been identified.

Stricter measures after fresh outbreaks

Following the recent outbreaks, we asked experts at Utrecht University's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment

(RIVM) and animal health service Royal GD to advise on possible amendments to the hygiene protocol for the mink industry. Based on their recommendations, the industry will tighten up the protocol and submit the proposed changes to the NVWA for approval. One important amendment to the protocol is mandatory use of non-medical face masks and face shields by all mink farm workers. The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality has also asked Royal GD to organise a webinar on hygiene measures at mink farms. This will be available to mink farm owners and workers from mid-July. Compulsory participation is to be included in the hygiene protocol.

It is imperative that all mink farm owners and workers comply fully with the hygiene regulations in order to prevent the possible introduction of the virus on their premises. We stress once again that any workers presenting with COVID-19 symptoms must not come into contact with the mink, must not enter the mink sheds and must get tested.

The NVWA will step up monitoring of compliance with the measures to prevent mink from becoming infected with SARS-CoV-2. In addition to the tracing efforts of the NVWA and the GGD, Utrecht University's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine will shortly carry out more in-depth investigations at all infected farms to identify possible virus introduction routes.

Despite all the measures taken to prevent the introduction of the virus to mink farms, outbreaks are still occurring and the virus introduction route is not clear. We have therefore asked the Expert Group on Animal Diseases to clarify the current epidemiological situation in the coming week. Next week we will also ask the Outbreak Management Team for Zoonoses (OMT-Z) for a further risk assessment and advisory opinion.

Local concerns

Several municipalities, residents and businesses in Brabant are concerned about the persistent outbreaks on mink farms. This is also apparent from a letter we recently received from the Brabant-Zuidoost Safety Region. We understand and share these concerns. It is precisely because the transmission route of the virus is not absolutely clear and we cannot rule out the possibility of further outbreaks, that we are tightening up the current measures and have commissioned additional research on transmission routes. In its letter, the Safety Region asks that preventive culling be carried out on all mink farms in the area. Preventive culling of healthy, non-infected animals is a very extreme measure to prevent the spread of disease in animals and is only used as a last resort to protect human or animal health. We are not at that stage yet. Public health is paramount at all times with all measures taken. Given the recent developments and new outbreaks, we will also seek the advice of the Expert Group on Animal Diseases and the OMT-Z, as mentioned above.

Mink farm screening results

Serological screening (for antibodies to the virus) of all mink farms has now been completed. Additional samples had to be collected at some farms, which meant that testing took longer than expected. All non-infected farms tested negative, i.e. SARS-CoV-2 was not present there.

Early warning system and screening of mink farms to continue

The situation on mink farms is monitored in three ways: compulsory notification of disease symptoms in mink, an early warning (EW) system (weekly submission of carcasses) and serological screening (testing for the presence of antibodies). Sixteen of the 22 infected farms were identified through EW testing, while the other six were notified. At the moment, the possibility of new outbreaks cannot be ruled out, so it is vital to continue monitoring in the period ahead. EW testing will be carried out in a similar manner for at least the next five weeks. If no further outbreaks occur over a period of a few weeks, serological screening of mink will be repeated to ensure that there have been no subclinical (asymptomatic) infections. Depending on the results, we will consider whether and how monitoring will subsequently be continued.

Manure removal

Manure pits on several non-infected mink farms are almost full, so owners will soon need to dispose of their contents. Manure from infected farms must also be removed so that the premises can be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. We asked the Expert Group on Animal Diseases, Wageningen Bioveterinary Research (WBVR) and RIVM for advice on how to dispose of the manure responsibly.

Non-infected mink farms

Based on the advice received, the removal of manure from non-infected farms will be permitted under certain conditions, as set out in statutory regulations. Mink manure may only be transported to locations where it will be applied directly by means of injection, or to a storage facility where it will be kept for at least three weeks, or to a processing plant where it will be heated to a temperature of 70°C or higher. A biosafety protocol will also be in place for the vehicles used and for people working with the manure.

Infected mink farms

WBVR recommends a minimum storage period of three weeks after depopulation is complete. Thereafter, the NVWA will grant exemption from the transport ban in individual cases on request. Mink farm owners will be required to transport the manure to a biogas plant, where it will be heated to a temperature of 70°C or higher.

Transfer of kits to other farms

Ten non-infected mink farms do not have the facilities to house weaned kits at the same location and normally at this time of year they would be moved to other locations, often belonging to the same owner. Keeping these kits on the breeding farms because of the transport ban would put their welfare significantly at risk. Due to their fast growth rate and body size and – partly as a result of this – their tendency to bite each other, the kits can no longer be housed with their mother. To remedy the situation, they will have to be moved to another location. The Expert Group on Animal Diseases recommends a number of measures that will greatly reduce the risk of spreading SARS-CoV-2 through moving the kits. Under these strict conditions (listed below), it will be possible to remove the kits safely and responsibly. Owners wishing to transfer kits from non-infected farms must in any case request exemption from the NVWA. The following conditions then apply:

- Random testing of mink on the farm of origin for SARS-CoV 2.
- Kits should preferably be moved to a location where there are currently no animals. This explicitly excludes farms that are vacant because mink were

previously culled due to SARS-Cov-2 infection. These premises should not be repopulated at this time. The NVWA monitors compliance with this last point.

- If there are already mink at the location in question, they are randomly tested for SARS-CoV-2 before the kits arrive.
- It is not permitted to transport kits from the high-risk area (North Brabant and Limburg) to a location outside the high-risk area, and vice versa.
- The kits are retested during the week following their arrival.
- Transportation may only take place with strict hygiene measures in place and after the official veterinarian has checked the animals.

Animal Diseases Welfare Committee's findings on mink farm depopulation

The Animal Diseases Welfare Committee informs the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality about its findings regarding the animal welfare aspects of culling and control measures and, if necessary, advises on possible improvements in this area. The Committee has made recommendations on the way in which infected mink are culled. A conscious decision was made to have the farm owners and workers carry out the culling because of their extensive expertise. The Committee was present at the first cull on 5 June 2020 and observed culling on another three mink farms between then and 15 June. The farms concerned were all different types and sizes. During its visits, the Committee noted that the process of killing the mink and their kits proceeded smoothly for the most part. The supervisor responded appropriately to instructions from the Committee. No avoidable distress was observed during culling. The Committee also attended a number of culls after 15 June; it will oversee any future culls and report back to us.

Research on farmed rabbits

Experimental research has found that rabbits could be susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 infection. As a precautionary measure, serological screening was therefore carried out at rabbit farms in the region where the infected mink farms are located, as announced in our letter to parliament of 8 May 2020 (no. 28286-1090). The screening was voluntary and involved testing blood samples collected at 18 rabbit farms. All blood samples tested negative, indicating that SARS-CoV-2 has not circulated on these 18 farms. There is currently no evidence of any SARS-CoV-2 infection in either farmed or pet rabbits in other countries.

As a precaution, the Expert Committee on Zoonoses (DB-Z) was consulted on this matter. In its report (appended to this letter), the DB-Z concluded on 1 July that, at that time, it was not yet known whether rabbit farms had been infected or whether rabbits could infect other animals or humans. The opinion of the DB-Z was to wait for the final results of the tests at the 18 farms. As indicated above, these are now known to be negative. For a complete picture, serological screening is to be extended to all rabbit farms in the Netherlands. Samples will be collected in July and the results are expected in August.

Vitamin D and mink: undertaking during debate on 10 June

During the debate in the House on 10 June 2020, MP Dion Graus of the Freedom Party (PVV) asked about the relationship between SARS-CoV-2 infection in mink and a possible vitamin D deficiency. We gave the undertaking to investigate what scientific information is currently available on the subject. Research shows that the synthesis of vitamin D induced by ultraviolet B light (sunlight) plays only a minor role in the vitamin D balance in carnivores such as mink. Otters, for example, do not appear to synthesise vitamin D after exposure to sunlight. It is

standard practice to supplement the diet of carnivores with large amounts of vitamin D, both in feed for zoo animals and in pet food for dogs and cats.

Dietary vitamin D deficiency causes rickets. For years, Royal GD has conducted post-mortem examinations to investigate the causes of mortality at Dutch mink farms. The results have consistently shown no evidence of rickets in mink, from which it can also be concluded that there does not appear to be any structural deficiency of vitamin D in the diet of mink in the Netherlands.

Yours sincerely,

the minister of Health, Welfare and Sport,

the minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality,

Hugo de Jonge

Carola Schouten