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Date 10 July 2020
Subject The situation regarding SARS-CoV-2 infections in farmed
mink

Dear Chairman,

As announced in our letter of 10 July 2020, we are writing to provide the House with an update on SARS-CoV-2 infections in farmed mink, to explain the conclusions and advisory opinions of the Outbreak Management Team for Zoonoses (OMT-Z) and the Administrative Coordination Committee on Zoonoses (BAO-Z), and to indicate how these will be reflected in our policy. We will also summarise the recent findings of the Animal Diseases Welfare Committee regarding the manner in which the culls have been handled.

1. Outbreaks at mink farms

Up to 17 July 2020, 25 mink farms have been found to be infected with SARS-CoV-2. Of these, 21 are in North Brabant and four in the province of Limburg. Eight of the outbreaks were identified after symptoms were reported in accordance with the notification requirement, 16 through the early warning system, under which mink farm owners send in five carcasses every week for further examination, and one after testing prior to transporting kits to another location (letter to parliament dated 10 July 2020, no. 2020D29407).

The Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) and the municipal health service (GGD) are investigating the possible routes of transmission on each farm. Their findings are not yet conclusive in every case. In addition to these tracing efforts, Utrecht University's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine will shortly carry out more in-depth investigations at all infected farms to identify possible introduction routes. We expect to have the preliminary results by mid-August.

Despite all the measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus to farms, there have been fresh outbreaks in recent weeks. Several municipalities, residents and businesses in the Brabant region where most of the affected holdings are located are concerned that the virus is continuing to circulate on mink farms. We would like to reiterate that we share these concerns.

In view of the persistent outbreaks, we asked the Expert Group on Animal Diseases to clarify the epidemiological situation. Since this situation may have

changed, we also asked the OMT-Z to carry out a further risk assessment and issue an advisory opinion. The OMT-Z met on Thursday 16 July 2020 for this specific purpose. The same day the BAO-Z convened to discuss the former's assessment as well as the conclusions of the meeting of the Expert Group on Animal Diseases held on Friday 10 July 2020.

2. Advisory opinion of the OMT-Z

The OMT-Z examined the continuing spread of SARS-CoV-2 on mink farms and the potential impact on public health. The team assessed whether the risk to human health posed by mink farms where SARS-CoV-2 is present had changed since its previous advisory opinion of 3 June 2020. The OMT-Z also advised on supplementary measures that could reduce or prevent risks to human and animal health.

Clarification on outbreaks

The OMT-Z indicates that infected farm workers are the most likely source of the recent outbreaks on mink farms. In the past few weeks, the mink have been handled frequently – specifically to wean (remove the kits from their mother) and vaccinate the kits – and this has involved a lot of close, direct contact between humans and animals. It cannot be ruled out that people infected with SARS-CoV-2 but presenting with very mild or no symptoms have worked in mink sheds.

Once the close handling stage comes to an end in July, there will be less contact between humans and mink. The OMT-Z expects that this, combined with the recently tightened hygiene protocol and preventive use of personal protective equipment on non-infected mink farms, will lower the risk of outbreaks. The impact after full implementation of these measures can only be assessed in a few weeks' time. Moreover, there is always a delay between initial transmission and detection of infection. The OMT-Z expects that over the course of the next three to four weeks, new outbreaks will occur (giving a rough estimate of 6-12 farms).

The OMT-Z does not think that the risk of the virus spreading from infected farmed mink to other animal species is any different from its previous assessment.

Public health

The OMT-Z points out that only people entering a contaminated mink shed have a realistic risk of being infected by mink. There is no evidence that the virus has spread to neighbouring property. Beyond the farm premises, there is no increased risk to public health.

The OMT-Z concludes that analysis of virus sequences also indicates the virus has not spread to the surrounding area. It recommends repeating sequencing in recently confirmed COVID-19 patients living in the same postcode area around infected farms in order to keep the sequence database up to date. The risk to public health is therefore unchanged from the previous OMT-Z assessment.

Supplementary measures

The OMT-Z recommends that the existing measures for people who are in contact with animals should be tightened up further, including extensive and thorough triage of mink farm workers, rigorous testing of all workers presenting with symptoms of COVID-19 and possibly also those without any symptoms, fixed teams on mink farms and proper registration of people who come into contact

with mink in the course of their job, a ban on workers moving between farms, and monitoring of compliance with the measures imposed.

In the event of new, confirmed outbreaks on mink farms after the middle of August, the OMT-Z's view is that this will be because the measures to prevent transmission are not feasible in practice. In this case, if the epidemiological situation in the human population remains unchanged, the advice is to carry out preventive culling so as to prevent mink farms from becoming viral reservoirs. If the public-health situation in the Netherlands does change, however, this measure will need to be reviewed.

As the virus is expected to continue circulating in the Netherlands, the OMT-Z recommends accelerating the phasing out of mink farming in the Netherlands to prevent renewed outbreaks among farmed mink during the next breeding season (when large numbers of temporary staff will also be deployed), possibly also in other areas. Where mink farm owners do not wish to make use of a voluntary cessation scheme, strict agreements must be made with them regarding the conditions under which this can be done, such as compliance with stringent hygiene measures.

3. Advisory opinion of the BAO-Z

In the BAO-Z meeting, the mink industry representatives and the administrative partners made recommendations to us on the basis of the OMT-Z's advisory opinion. The mink industry agrees with the OMT-Z's analysis. Its representatives point out that mink farm owners are well aware of the risks of infection and understand the importance of applying measures properly. The owners do not support preventive culling unless there is an urgent need for it on human or animal health grounds. The industry expects the government to come up with a sound cessation scheme and promises its full cooperation.

The administrative partners in the region also endorse the OMT-Z's advisory opinion. They consider that the situation must be monitored closely and, in light of these recommendations, do not at this time consider it appropriate to proceed with preventive culling. They also stress the importance of proper compliance with the measures in place.

4. Proposed policy

We have reviewed the OMT-Z's analysis and recommendations. The OMT-Z outlines a number of measures to prevent outbreaks on mink farms and also points out that the risk to public health has not changed since its previous advisory opinion. We will therefore be acting on the advisory opinions of the OMT-Z and the BAO-Z.

With the additional measures that have been in place since 10 July 2020 and the period in which mink are handled frequently coming to an end, we expect the likelihood and number of outbreaks to decrease. Nevertheless, other infected farms are likely to be found in the near future, as the OMT-Z also stated. Intensive monitoring of the entire industry will therefore continue.

Strict compliance with hygiene measures on mink farms is essential to prevent outbreaks. In our letter of 10 July 2020, we informed the House about plans to

tighten up these measures. The OMT-Z has stressed the importance of the hygiene measures and the need for all mink farm staff to be aware of and comply with these measures. We therefore urge the whole industry to adhere strictly to all measures. This includes the visitor registration requirement, the hygiene protocol and the testing of mink farm workers with COVID-19 symptoms. To prevent the introduction of SARS-CoV-2 to mink farms, the OMT-Z also recommends assessing the effect of testing workers without symptoms. One option would be to test temporary staff before they start working at a farm. We have asked the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) to look at this in more detail with the GGD.

If further outbreaks occur after the middle of August and if the epidemiological situation in the human population remains unchanged, the OMT-Z advises preventive culling on mink farms. If the public-health situation in the Netherlands does change, however, the OMT-Z says that this measure will need to be reviewed. Guided by this advisory opinion, we will ask the OMT-Z to prepare a follow-up advisory opinion that takes a closer look at the risk assessment as well as at appropriate and effective measures to be taken protect public health.

The OMT-Z also recommends that operations should not be resumed after culling. During the debate in the House on 10 June 2020, the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality undertook to explore the possibility of a voluntary cessation scheme for mink farmers who want to cease their operations in the short term. We have already reported back to the House on this matter in a letter dated 30 June 2020 (Parliamentary Paper 28286-1120). We have since commissioned research into the loss of value for mink farms and are currently drafting a scheme. The government will reach a decision on the voluntary cessation scheme in August and will inform the House accordingly.

We are submitting the reports of the OMT-Z and the Expert Group on Animal Diseases to the House with this letter.

5. Animal Diseases Welfare Committee's findings concerning the culls

Finally, we provide a summary of the findings of the Animal Diseases Welfare Committee. Between 5 June (the first cull) and 8 July, the Committee visited seven mink farms that were being depopulated. Its summary report covering this period is included with this letter. The Committee noted that the NVWA supervised the entire process to ensure all steps were properly implemented, and responded appropriately where the procedure needed to be amended. No shortcomings or avoidable distress were observed. The killing method used worked quickly, preventing unnecessary suffering. To reduce agitation during culling, the animals were placed together in a gas box.

Under Council Regulation (EC) No. 1099/2009 of 24 September 2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing, the animals should be introduced one by one into the stunning chamber and killed. However, the Regulation offers scope for deviating from this rule in an emergency. Killing mink and their kits for the purpose of preventing SARS-CoV-2 outbreaks qualifies as an emergency, not least because the culling process would take much longer if each mink were killed individually and this would not be in the interests of human or animal health. Checks are carried out when the gas boxes are emptied to see whether any animals are still showing signs of life. This was observed only very occasionally,

but the animals were immediately placed in another gas box already filled with carbon monoxide. Regular checks of the gas boxes for damage or leaks were subsequently included in the NVWA protocol. The Animal Diseases Welfare Committee will also supervise any future culls and report back to the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality.

Yours sincerely,

the minister of Health, Welfare and
Sport,

the minister of Agriculture, Nature
and Food Quality,

Hugo de Jonge

Carola Schouten