

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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Dear Chairman,

As announced in our letter of 1 June 2020, we are writing to inform the House of additional measures that will apply to mink farms in order to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2. These measures were decided within the zoonoses crisis structure that came into effect on 25 May 2020 (see also our letter of 28 May).

The OMT-Z (Outbreak Management Team for Zoonoses) today gave its assessment of the public health risks posed by farms infected with COVID-19. This assessment and the conclusions of last Friday's meeting of the Expert Group on Animal Diseases were discussed in a meeting of the Administrative Coordination Committee on Zoonoses (BAO-Z) today. In this letter we explain the conclusions and advisory opinions of the OMT-Z and BAO-Z, and how these have led us to conclude that culling should be carried out at the infected farms in the interests of both human and animal health. We are also introducing additional measures for non-infected farms. In this letter we provide an update on confirmed and suspected outbreaks and the results of early warning testing and screening at mink farms. We also look at the possibility of a voluntary cessation scheme for mink farmers who want to terminate their operations. The OMT-Z report will be sent to the House as soon as it is available.

1. Advisory opinions of the OMT-Z and BAO-Z

In addition to human infectious disease experts, veterinary experts also took part in today's OMT-Z meeting. The OMT-Z examined the risks to human health posed by farmed mink (and possibly other animal species), which could become reservoirs for SARS-CoV-2. This would mean that at infected mink farms, the virus would not rapidly peter out but instead continue to circulate for a lengthy period of time. The OMT-Z estimated the likelihood of this scenario and recommended veterinary measures that could be taken to prevent risks to animal health. Finally, the OMT-Z also explicitly discussed whether the forming of SARS-CoV-2 reservoirs in farmed mink or other animal species justifies additional measures with a view to human health.

The OMT-Z considers that there is a risk that SARS-CoV-2 would continue to circulate on mink farms for a lengthy period of time. Furthermore, the early

warning testing has already identified new outbreaks and more are expected to be confirmed in the weeks ahead. In the coming period there will also be more staff present on the farms to vaccinate and care for the animals, which presents an additional risk. The OMT-Z also drew attention to various uncertain factors that could play a role, such as the likelihood of the virus mutating. To date, in the human epidemic the spread of the virus has been driven by human-to-human transmission. As the human epidemic eases and the likelihood of human-to-human transmission decreases, a mink-to-human transmission could lead to more cases of SARS-CoV-2 in humans. We want to prevent this.

Mink farms operate according to an annual cycle, with the kits being born in spring. Previously infected mothers will pass on antibodies to their kits. But as this maternal immunity decreases over time, there will be five to six times as many susceptible animals on the farm as when the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak began, when there were only pregnant females present. This means that there will be many more animals that could become infected, and that would prolong the outbreak on a farm. We want to prevent this too.

The OMT-Z advises culling as an effective measure for infected farms. A lengthy period of isolation is an option for non-infected farms, with strict protocols (including for farm workers) and frequent testing (weekly early warning testing) to ensure effective infection prevention and help protect these farms. Strict compliance with the rules is essential. The OMT-Z concludes that feral cats on mink farms do not pose a risk to domestic cats in the vicinity or to human health.

The OMT-Z also considers that, given the uncertain factors and potential risks, isolation could be duly achieved by offering a scheme that would allow mink farmers to voluntarily cease their operations well before the fur farming ban comes into force in 2024.

In the BAO-Z meeting mink industry representatives stated that they understand the need for far-reaching measures at infected farms and highlighted the importance of due care in decision-making and communication. The BAO-Z endorses the OMT-Z's advisory opinion to proceed to culling at the infected farms.

In the opinion of the administrative partners, introducing a scheme for non-infected farms as a precautionary measure would be appropriate in light of the fact that fur farming will be banned in the Netherlands as of 2024. It would also respond to concerns within local communities in North Brabant, the fact that many farms are situated in close proximity to each other and the view that it would be difficult to draw up a protocol that offers sufficient safeguards against infection and a sufficiently high degree of compliance.

Part of the BAO-Z has advised preventive culling at these farms, in addition to the infected farms.

2. Measures on infected mink farms

On the basis of the advisory opinions of the OMT-Z and BAO-Z, the government has decided to proceed to the culling of animals at infected farms, starting on Friday. This will be done by the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA). The Animal Welfare Committee has been informed and will

ensure that the animals are treated and killed humanely. As with outbreaks of other infectious animal diseases involving the culling of animals, such as highly pathogenic avian influenza, the farmer is entitled to compensation from the Animal Health Fund for the culled animals, in accordance with the statutory rules governing the fund. This compensation will be financed using the public resources in the Fund.

Before culling, the mink need to be valued by designated valuers using value tables that list the most current value of the various categories of mink (breeding female, breeding male and kit). The value tables were drawn up by Wageningen Economic Research and discussed with mink industry representatives. Value tables are also used in the event of mandatory culling during other animal disease outbreaks (such as the culling of poultry during an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza).

Because the culling is also in the interest of public health, the order designating Sars-CoV-2 as an infectious disease has been amended. This designation had previously been based on veterinary considerations.

The culling of animals on all infected farms should be completed in the course of next week. The carcasses will be removed from the farm for rendering. After the culling the sheds will need to remain empty until the risk of active virus still being present has subsided. The sheds must then be cleaned and disinfected. To avoid the dispersal of feral cats from these farms in the wider area, they will be fed on the farm.

Concerns among mink farmers and local residents

We realise that the decision to depopulate the infected farms is difficult for the farmers concerned. The NVWA is coordinating the culling in close consultation with the farmers. Any mink farmers requiring psychosocial care at this time should contact their regular healthcare provider. The NVWA can provide advice where necessary.

We also understand the concerns that have arisen in the municipalities where the infected farms are located. We therefore seek to provide maximum transparency in our contacts with the local and regional authorities. And we will of course continue to actively involve individual municipalities and inform them of each step in the process following our decision to cull.

3. Measures on non-infected mink farms

In response to the OMT-Z's advisory opinion, all measures that apply nationally to non-infected farms will remain in place. This includes the requirement to send in, on a weekly basis, the carcasses of animals that have died of natural causes to enable the tracing of new outbreaks. On top of these measures, the existing hygiene protocol will have to be tightened up very shortly in accordance with the OMT-Z's advisory opinion, and will also address the issue of coronavirus testing for farm workers. The sector will be responsible for amending the protocol, which will require the NVWA's approval. It is essential that mink farmers and farm employees adhere strictly to this protocol.

The government is also exploring the possibility of a one-off, voluntary cessation scheme for mink farmers who want to terminate their operations in the short term. We will provide the House with more information on this matter shortly.

Partly in light of the advisory opinion of the BAO-Z, it is relevant to note that under the Animal Health and Welfare Act the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality can only order the culling of animals that are confirmed or suspected to be sick. As a result, there is currently no legal basis for the mandatory culling of animals on farms that have tested negative in weekly early warning testing and where no infection has been identified.

4. Current status of mink farm investigation

In our previous letter we mentioned another farm where an outbreak was suspected. Wageningen Bioveterinary Research has since confirmed the presence of SARS-CoV-2 on this farm. There are now seven holdings with confirmed infections (at a total of nine sites) in the municipalities of Gemert-Bakel, Laarbeek, Deurne, Sint Anthonis and Venray.

The early warning programme (the weekly sending in of carcasses of animals that have died of natural causes) may identify new outbreaks or suspected outbreaks in the weeks ahead. ELISA, a serological test, is now ready for use. It will be used to screen all mink farms in the Netherlands. The first blood samples will be analysed this week and we expect the results from all farms to be available next week.

We will keep the House informed of the results of both ongoing testing programmes: the early warning testing and the screening.

Yours sincerely,

the minister of Health, Welfare and Sport,

the minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality,

Hugo de Jonge

Carola Schouten