



✉ P.O. Box 3451
SALT LAKE CITY, UT 84110
☎ 385-401-4301
🌐 uarc.io
🐦 @uarc

October 13, 2020

The Office of Governor Gary R. Herbert
350 North State Street, Suite 200
PO Box 142220
Salt Lake City, UT 84114-2220

Sent via U.S. Mail and Via E-Mail

Dear Governor Herbert:

I am writing on behalf of Utah Animal Rights Coalition (UARC) and our thousands of members and supporters in the state of Utah to again ask that your office take more decisive action to curb the serious and growing public health threat posed by the zoonotic transmission of coronavirus that is occurring on Utah mink farms.

In light of new emerging evidence that severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the virus that causes COVID-19, is transmissible from mink to humans, and that outbreaks are continuing to occur on Utah mink farms, we urge you to exercise the authority under your March 6, 2020 Executive Order 2020-1 (extended under Executive Order 2020-63) and Utah Code § 53-2a-209(1) to issue new updated orders to (1) immediately suspend all breeding operations on mink farms, (2) mandate COVID-19 testing protocols for both animals and workers, and (3) facilitate greater public transparency about this public health threat.

Transmissibility of COVID-19 in mink

On August 19, 2020, we wrote to your office urging you to take action to address emerging COVID-19 outbreaks on Utah fur farms. In the eight weeks since our last letter, the matter has only worsened, with industry sources and premiere scientific institutions confirming that transmission is not only occurring between mink, but it is also crossing the species barrier to humans (known as the “spillover effect”) and then spreading further via human-to-human transmission. This is an incredibly dangerous situation that must be immediately addressed.

The Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota is recognized as a global authoritative source of scientific information about emerging infectious diseases. CIDRAP recently published a new update about emerging research about the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 among human and nonhuman animals.¹ It describes how COVID-19 infections were monitored by

¹ Beusekom MV. COVID-19 likely spreading from people to animals—and vice versa. *Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota*. 18 Sep 2020. Available at <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/09/covid-19-likely-spreading-people-animals-and-vice-versa>.

researchers “at 16 mink farms with more than 720,000 animals in the Netherlands.” This type of systematic surveillance was possible only because in May 2020, Dutch authorities ordered all farms regularly test mink for COVID-19 antibodies.² Mink can be silent, asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19, which means the only way to proactively identify disease clusters is through proactive testing. This system of proactive surveillance is a much more robust animal health monitoring system than we currently have in Utah.

After analyzing case patterns and employing genetic tracing techniques, the researchers found that “the virus was introduced from humans and has evolved on mink farms.” Alarming, the genetic tracing also confirmed that “at least two people on the farms were infected by mink,” demonstrating bidirectional zoonotic transmission. A manuscript documenting this study titled “Jumping back and forth” is in preprint publication.³ This alarming finding completely contradicts recent public statements by Dr. Dean Taylor, Utah’s state veterinarian, that there is “no sign” that mink are spreading COVID-19 to humans and that transmission appears to be a “unidirectional path.”^{4,5}

Privately, sources within the fur industry have admitted that transmission can occur from mink to humans. At the September 28, 2020 annual convention of Fur Commission USA, Dr. John Easley, DVM, Director of Research, stated:

[Researchers are] extremely confident that they’ve been able to demonstrate that [COVID-19] was brought on to farms by humans, the virus changed in the mink, and that changed virus was then transmitted back to people, and the people that got infected, transmitted that virus to other people. This is new information that is out now, so that is extremely important to the industry. It shows that mink can potentially be a reservoir for the virus, for the human population.⁶

² Krever M. Dutch authorities believe minks may have infected human with Covid-19. *CNN*. 20 May 2020. Available at https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-05-20-20-intl/h_a41e960bbcb8f2b9f8b9201c153b5bc.

³ Oude Munnink BB *et al*. Jumping back and forth: anthrozoönotic and zoonotic transmission of SARS-CoV-2 on mink farms [Internet]. Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory; 1 Sep 2020. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1101/2020.09.01.277152>.

⁴ Aleccia J. Thousands of mink dead in COVID outbreak on Utah farms. *Jackson Hole News & Guide*. 7 Oct 2020. Available at https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/jackson_hole_daily/state_and_regional/thousands-of-minks-dead-in-covid-outbreak-on-utah-farms/article_03faf907-1f49-5c2b-96fd-6896824e827b.html

⁵ Mossburg, C. At least 8,000 mink dead in Utah after contracting COVID-19. *CNN*. 8 Oct 2020. Available at https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-10-08-20-intl/h_b1b17737445ac5cb60f54df4b0467c5d.

⁶ Video excerpted from his statement to the Fur Commission USA 2020 Annual Meeting is available at <https://youtu.be/o9dvnHcP2n0>.

This is an extremely alarming development that must be immediately responded to with policy changes in the state of Utah.

Utah's ongoing COVID-19 outbreak on mink farms

It is already well-established that outbreaks of COVID-19 are occurring on Utah mink farms. When UARC last wrote in August, public reporting was that two farms were reported to have positive COVID-19 cases, although industry sources seem to indicate that at least five farms were experiencing deadly outbreaks at that time.^{7,8} According to recent reports in the Associated Press and elsewhere, there are now at least “nine [fur farms] in three counties” that have experienced outbreaks of COVID-19, killing thousands of mink.⁹ At each of these facilities, mink are likely acting as significant reservoirs for not only viral transmission, but each infected mink also represents a biological factory for amplification and possible mutation. This could result in new serotypes of SARS-CoV-2 that could prove to be even more dangerous, should they cross the species barrier and infect humans. New serotypes could also thwart immunity in individuals who have already experienced COVID-19, resulting in possible re-infection or undercutting the effectiveness of potential future vaccination efforts. This threat is very real.

Privately, sources from within the fur industry are also admitting that Utah fur farms are not taking common sense precautions to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and that outbreaks are running rampant. An October 8, 2020 communication from Fur Commission USA states that prior to outbreaks on Utah fur farms, “[t]here was a history of mink farm employees with signs of illness”¹⁰. Public reports also indicated that these confirmed COVID-19 positive individuals “came in contact with the mink”.¹¹ It is inexcusable that these employees were not prohibited by any state law or regulation from having contact with mink, which are known disease vectors.

Utah is no longer the only state experiencing COVID-19 outbreaks on mink farms. On October 8, 2020, a joint press release from state agencies in Wisconsin announced that SARS-CoV-2 had been identified on a mink farm there, and on

⁷ Stephenson, Kathy. Utah mink test positive for the virus that causes COVID-19 in humans. *The Salt Lake Tribune*. 17 Aug 2020. Available at <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2020/08/17/utah-mink-test-positive>.

⁸ Fur Commission USA. Email communication regarding Mink Farm COVID Outbreaks. 8 Oct 2020. Available at <https://uarc.io/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-10-08-Update-from-FCUSA-on-Mink-Farms.pdf>.

⁹ Aleccia JoNEL. Thousands of minks Dead in COVID outbreak on Utah Farms. *Associated Press*. 5 Oct 2020. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-utah-animals-archive-2863345161adeebb318a3276e35e9501>.

¹⁰ Fur Commission USA. Email communication regarding Mink Farm COVID Outbreaks. 8 Oct 2020. Available at <https://uarc.io/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-10-08-Update-from-FCUSA-on-Mink-Farms.pdf>.

¹¹ Cahan, Eli. COVID-19 hits U.S. mink farms after ripping through Europe. *Science*. 18 Aug 2020. Available at <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/08/covid-19-hits-us-mink-farms-after-ripping-through-europe>

October 9, Michigan followed suit.^{12,13} Wisconsin and Utah represent the states with the largest mink farming industry in the United States. Notably, these states are all currently experiencing sharp spikes of COVID-19 cases among their citizens, as well. Clearly, matters are not improving on their own. Utah must immediately take action to address this problem.

Plan of Action

As you have made clear at several public briefings, Utah statutes and our current state of emergency declaration give the Governor's Office broad authority to combat the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It's long past time that this authority is exercised to curb the threat of COVID-19 transmission emanating from Utah fur farms, an industry that is not only unspeakably cruel to animals, but now poses a significant public health risk to the community at large, all so that a handful of people can profit off selling pelts, primarily to consumers in China.

UARC is calling on your office to take the following immediate steps, many of which have already been taken in European nations which previously had significant fur farming industries:

- **End what's left of the dying fur farming industry in Utah.** You can do this by issuing an order that immediately halts all breeding on mink farms, which would facilitate a shut down of the industry after the upcoming pelting season is finished. This measure has already been implemented in the Netherlands, which had raised about 2.5 million mink per year.¹⁴
- **Immediately implement stringent COVID-19 testing protocols for both workers and animals on mink farms.** Just as Dutch authorities ordered in May 2020,¹⁵ Utah should require COVID-19 testing of both animals and workers on all mink farms to facilitate the quick identification of emerging outbreaks so that infected facilities and people can be immediately quarantined. Requiring testing would be no more burdensome than what Utahns in other sectors already experience, including those who work in slaughterhouses and long-term care facilities. Proactive is the only way to

¹²News release. Taylor County mink test positive for coronavirus. Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP). 8 Oct 2020. Available at <https://datcp.wi.gov/Documents2/20201008TaylorMinkFarmCoronavirus.pdf>.

¹³ News release. Mink farm tests positive with SARS-CoV-2. Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development (MDA). 9 Oct 2020. Available at <https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/0,4610,7-125--541996--00.html>.

¹⁴ *The Economist*. Covid-19 ends Dutch mink farming. 5 Sep 2020. Available at <https://uarc.io/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-09-05-The-Economist-Fur-Farming.pdf>.

¹⁵ Krever M. Dutch authorities believe minks may have infected human with Covid-19. *CNN*. 20 May 2020. Available at https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-05-20-20-intl/h_a41e960bbcbd8f2b9f8b9201c153b5bc.

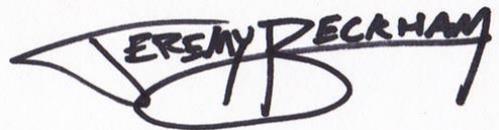
identify presymptomatic and asymptomatic cases, an important measure in light of the fact that mink themselves can be silent carriers.

- **Require transparency.** In August 2020, UARC submitted a records request to the Utah Department of Agriculture of Food to learn more about where COVID outbreaks are occurring on Utah mink farms and what measures are being implemented to contain this public health threat.¹⁶ The agency denied the vast majority of the information UARC sought. Issues relating to COVID-19 are of significant concern to the local media and public. The information UARC sought will shine a light on the conduct of state officials in responding to COVID-19 outbreaks in our state, promoting transparency and preserving accountability. Today, UARC is submitting a renewed request, and we intend to exercise our legal rights to appeal any denial. We urge your office to order state agencies to release this information without delay to avoid unnecessary legal disputes.

Ending fur farming in Utah not only makes sense for public health, it is also the humane thing to do. Mink are isolated in shoebox-sized wire cages on disgusting mink farms, where they suffer severe psychological distress and spin endlessly in circles due to the cruel conditions of confinement. We have attached some photographs to this letter which represent standard operating conditions on mink farms. It must be stressed that growing concerns about the treatment of animals have resulted in sluggish retail sales of fur products, which means that even before COVID-19, mink farming was a dying industry in Utah. Half of all mink farms in Utah have already shut down for good this year. There is no reason not to facilitate the total end of this archaic and cruel industry that is now posing a serious public health threat to Utahns.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I can be reached at jeremy@uarc.io or 385-401-4301. I look forward to hearing from you or your representative soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JEREMY BECKHAM". The signature is written in a stylized, cursive font with a large, prominent "B".

Jeremy Beckham, MPA, MPH
Executive Director
Utah Animal Rights Coalition (UARC)

¹⁶ UARC's August 2020 GRAMA and UDAF's response can be viewed on our website, <https://uarc.io/uarc-to-governor-herbert-shut-down-mink-farms-now/>. UARC still has a pending federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with relevant federal health authorities.







