



# Animal Welfare Institute

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March 3, 2025

The Honorable Robert E. Craven, Sr.  
Chairman of the House Committee on Judiciary  
Rhode Island House of Representatives

Dear Chairman Craven,

The Animal Welfare Institute, a national nonprofit animal advocacy organization that represents members in Rhode Island, strongly supports H. 5447 to prohibit the sale of new fur products made from the pelts of farmed animals. The fashion world has begun to transition away from the cruel and dangerous practice of fur production, and Rhode Island is well-positioned to join other states and municipalities leading the way on this important issue.

## Animal Welfare

Commercially manufactured fur coats and trim are vanity products, and millions of animals suffer and die needlessly on fur farms every year for these “luxury” garments. Making a single fur coat typically involves electrocuting or gassing 10–24 foxes or 36–65 mink.

Animals on fur farms are kept in small wire cages, and behavioral studies demonstrate that they live in a state of “continuous” and “extreme” fear characterized by trembling, defecating, and withdrawing to the back of the cage in response to humans.<sup>1</sup> Numerous scientific reports and investigations have found that animals in fur production experience serious physical and mental health problems, including infections; severe wounds such as missing ears, missing eyes, and shortened tails (sometimes from fighting); self-mutilation; cannibalism of siblings or offspring; and other stress-related behaviors.<sup>2,3</sup>

The methods of slaughter are equally inhumane. When the animals’ pelts are at their prime, within the first year of life, the animals are gassed with carbon dioxide or monoxide in a killing box, electrocuted, or bludgeoned, or they have their necks broken. Because 30 to 50 animals at a time may be forced into a single kill box, animals may pile up and die by suffocation. The most common way farmed foxes are

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<sup>1</sup> Nimon A J, and Broom DM, The welfare of farmed mink (*Mustela vison*) in relation to housing and management; A Review. *Animal Welfare* 9: 205–228 (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare. The Welfare of Animals Kept for Fur Production. *European Commission, Health & Consumer Protection Directorate-General* (2001). [https://food.ec.europa.eu/document/download/295ea587-ea69-4f2e-9ed1-7d8745a90f3d\\_en?filename=sci-com\\_scah\\_out67\\_en.pdf](https://food.ec.europa.eu/document/download/295ea587-ea69-4f2e-9ed1-7d8745a90f3d_en?filename=sci-com_scah_out67_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Shocking investigation reveals foxes with diseased eyes, deformed feet, missing ears & obesity on supposedly ‘high-welfare’ Finnish fur farms. *Humane Society International* (November 22, 2021). <https://www.hsi.org/news-resources/shocking-investigation-reveals-foxes-with-diseased-eyes-deformed-feet-missing-ears-obesity-on-supposedly-high-welfare-finnish-fur-farms/>

killed is by anal electrocution, which involves an apparatus with two electrodes, one being inserted in the rectum while the other is applied to the mouth, followed by cervical dislocation (neck breaking).

## Public Health

Not only are these intensive farming operations a needlessly cruel way of creating luxury fashion items, but fur farms are also a serious public health hazard.

Mink pose a high risk to humans because their upper respiratory tract is physiologically similar to ours, which means they can become infected by—and potentially transmit to people—some of the same respiratory viruses. Furthermore, mink’s susceptibility to acquiring and spreading both human and animal respiratory viruses render them potentially potent “mixing vessels” for generating novel virus strains.<sup>4</sup>

In 2023, infectious disease experts at Imperial College London, in a paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, concluded that mink farming poses a high risk for future viral pandemics.<sup>5</sup> Fur farms house mink in filthy, crowded environments that create an ideal setting for pathogens to circulate among and across species.<sup>6</sup> The confined conditions cause caged mink to become highly stressed and thus immune-compromised, making them even more susceptible to infection. The absence of legal requirements for veterinary care only compounds the problem.

In recent years, in fact, we have witnessed the danger of widespread pathogen transmission on fur farms. A deadly avian influenza virus (H5N1) has infected tens of thousands of mink on nearly three dozen fur farms since 2022. During an October 2022 outbreak on a mink farm in Spain, the virus developed at least one mutation that favors mammal-to-mammal spread, allowing it to spread from mink to mink.<sup>7</sup> (Before this outbreak, the virus spread primarily through contact with infected birds, not between mammals.) Scientists referred to this H5N1 mink farm outbreak as a “warning bell,” calling it a “clear mechanism for an H5 pandemic to start.”<sup>8</sup>

H5N1 infections were also detected at multiple mink farms in Finland in 2023,<sup>9</sup> demonstrating the risk that this virus could continue to cause outbreaks on mink farms. Each outbreak risks thousands more minks becoming infected, creating thousands more opportunities to incubate a dangerous H5N1 mutation that is transmissible between humans.

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<sup>4</sup> Sun, H., et al. (2021). Mink is a highly susceptible host species to circulating human and avian influenza viruses. *Emerging Microbes & Infections*, 10(1), 472–480. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22221751.2021.1899058>

<sup>5</sup> Peacock, T. P., & Barclay, W. S. (2023). Mink farming poses risks for future viral pandemics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120(30). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2303408120>

<sup>6</sup> Runquist, P. (2021, August). HSVMA statement - fur-farmed animals and risk of disease. *The Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association*. [https://www.hsvma.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1179%3Afur\\_riskofdisease](https://www.hsvma.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1179%3Afur_riskofdisease)

<sup>7</sup> Agüero, M., et al. (2023). Highly pathogenic avian influenza A (H5N1) virus infection in farmed minks, Spain, October 2022. *Eurosurveillance*, 28(3). <https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.es.2023.28.3.2300001>

<sup>8</sup> Kupferschmidt, K. (2023, January 24). ‘Incredibly concerning’: Bird flu outbreak at Spanish mink farm triggers pandemic fears. *Science*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/incredibly-concerning-bird-flu-outbreak-spanish-mink-farm-triggers-pandemic-fears>

<sup>9</sup> Lindh, E., et al. (2023). Highly pathogenic avian influenza A(H5N1) virus infection on multiple fur farms in the South and Central Ostrobothnia regions of Finland, July 2023. *Euro Surveillance*, 28(31). <https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2023.28.31.2300400>

Additionally, mink are highly susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 (the coronavirus that causes COVID-19), with outbreaks on more than 480 known mink fur farms across 12 countries. The virus has infected tens of thousands of captive mink in the United States<sup>10</sup> and millions of mink in Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Sweden.<sup>11</sup>

Alarmingly, mink are already capable of passing a mutated form of the SARS-CoV-2 virus back to humans.<sup>12</sup> Mink-to-human transmission has been reported in at least six countries so far, including the United States. Four people in Michigan were infected with a unique strain of the virus traced back to mink.<sup>13</sup> Spillback from mink farms to humans could continue to introduce new variants, undermining the effectiveness of vaccines and jeopardizing efforts to contain the pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, mink, like humans, can become infected with COVID-19 without showing symptoms, thus potentially serving as an undetected reservoir of the disease. Mink frequently escape farms, and escapees can transmit the virus to wild populations, potentially establishing natural, widespread reservoirs of the virus outside of captive populations. In December 2020, a wild mink captured near a mink farm in Utah tested positive for a variant of COVID-19 indistinguishable from the virus found in infected mink in a nearby farm—demonstrating the real danger of transmission to other populations.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, fur farms risk worsening the current pandemic and ushering in the next one. Rhode Island has an opportunity to end the sale of fur, not only for the sake of the animals but also to protect public health and safety.

## Similar Bans

Cities, states and even countries are now banning fur sales to reduce the market for fur products. In 2019, California became the first state to ban fur sales after similar measures passed in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Berkeley, and West Hollywood. Cities in Massachusetts, Michigan, and Florida have since passed similar legislation. Furthermore, many major fashion brands and retailers have committed to go fur-free, including Nordstrom, Macy's, Bloomingdale's, Saks Fifth Avenue, Gucci, Versace, and Giorgio Armani. Rhode Island has a chance to join these jurisdictions and companies as a leader in addressing the serious animal welfare and public health threats posed by the fur industry.

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<sup>10</sup> Coronavirus confirmed in mink at Oregon Fur Farm. *RochesterFirst*. (2020, November 28). <https://www.rochesterfirst.com/news/coronavirus-confirmed-in-mink-at-oregon-fur-farm/>

<sup>11</sup> Žigaitė, S., et al. (2023). Evaluation of SARS-CoV-2 passive surveillance in Lithuanian mink farms, 2020–2021. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2023.1181826>

<sup>12</sup> Oude Munnink, B. B., et al. (2021). Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 on mink farms between humans and mink and back to humans. *Science*, 371(6525), 172–177. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abe5901>

<sup>13</sup> Shamus, K. J. (2022, April 20). 4 Michiganders with COVID-19 strain unique to mink were likely 1st US spillover cases. *Detroit Free Press*. <https://www.freep.com/story/news/health/2022/04/17/michigan-covid-cases-tied-to-mink-human-spillover/7338784001/>

<sup>14</sup> Joint statement on the prioritization of monitoring SARS-CoV-2 infection in wildlife and preventing the formation of Animal Reservoirs. *World Health Organization*. (2022, March 7). <https://www.who.int/news/item/07-03-2022-joint-statement-on-the-prioritization-of-monitoring-sars-cov-2-infection-in-wildlife-and-preventing-the-formation-of-animal-reservoirs>

<sup>15</sup> García de Jesús, E. (2020, December 16). Utah mink is the first wild animal to test positive for coronavirus. *Science News*. <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/covid-19-coronavirus-mink-utah-first-wild-animal-test-positive>

The Animal Welfare Institute respectfully urges the Committee to pass H. 5447, and I welcome any questions on the information presented in this testimony.

Sincerely,

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