

COVID-19 AND THE MINK CRISIS IN DENMARK

A 2-STAGE POLICY PATH TOWARD A HEALTHY MINK FUR INDUSTRY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Unhealthy conditions on intensive mink farms amplify the risk of zoonotic disease emergence and pose a threat to human, animal, and environmental health.
- The recently emerged Cluster-5 variant of COVID-19 is a public health crisis requiring an urgent response. Such a response carries a variety of health, economic, and political implications, and must balance the priorities of a range of scientific, industrial, and governmental stakeholders.
- A strategic 2-stage policy path is recommended. First, a **response** stage (several months - 1 year) secures the immediate containment and control of the Cluster-5 variant. Second, a **prevention** stage (1 - 10 years) implements long-term improvements to mink farm conditions to protect against future threats of zoonotic disease emergence, through the redesign of regulations and standards related to animal health and disease surveillance and a gradual reduction of mink farm operations nationally.

Background and Importance of Problem

Under intensive animal farming conditions, zoonotic diseases can spread rapidly, endangering animals as well as amplifying the health risk to humans. On November 2, 2020, the Statens Serum Institut detected a new SARS-CoV-2 variant in Denmark, dubbed “Cluster-5,” which mutated among farmed mink and re-emerged to infect at least 12 humans. While little is yet known about the potential for the mutated strain to have increased transmissibility, virulence, and/or vaccine-responsiveness, Cluster-5 stands poised as an urgent global public health threat, necessitating immediate government action to secure its containment. Denmark’s mink fur industry is the largest in the world, and mink farms contribute important cultural significance to individuals, families, and communities throughout the country. Hence the consequences of government action to contain Cluster-5 will directly impact the national economic and social landscape, and policy options must be chosen with appropriate considerations for their secondary consequences.

Critique of Policy Options

There is pressure on the government to immediately mandate the culling of all mink nationwide, including from the Statens Serum Institut. Although there is not yet scientific evidence that Cluster-5 poses a greater danger to public health than typical strains of SARS-CoV-2, waiting for further research may allow the variant to spread out of control. Implementing a swift and decisive national cull would likely eliminate Cluster-5 entirely.

¹ Note for the reader: this policy brief is written from the perspective of early November 2020—preceding any official Danish government action.

Ultimately, however, such a solution ignores broader impacts on the mink industry and is likely to spark unacceptable levels of economic destruction and political backlash.

- Denmark produces 40% of the world's mink fur, employs around 6,000 employees total, and raises approximately 17 million mink per year.
- Danish mink farms are largely family and privately owned and operated, often across many generations, and produce pelts considered the finest in the world, partly due to century-old lineages of selective breeding.
- Culling the entire mink population would result in total destruction of this industry, bringing economic devastation to individual workers, local businesses, and Copenhagen Fur, the world's leading mink fur auction house.
- Publicly perceived government disregard for local livelihoods, especially among family-owned operations, is likely to generate public outrage and backlash against the government.

Policy Recommendation

It is imperative to view the control of Cluster-5 from a system-wide and optimized policy perspective, as an issue affecting not only the immediate state of global public health, but also the long-term economic and political stability of Denmark. We recommend a 2-stage **response** and **prevention** program that incorporates both short term and long term strategies.

Stage 1: Response (several months - 1 year)

The goal of the response stage is to contain and control the Cluster-5 variant while mitigating the severity of economic damage.

1. National surveillance for Cluster-5 should be implemented on mink farms, with testing kits, PPE, and training rapidly deployed to all mink farms.
2. This surveillance system should inform a continually-updated **two-ring zone designation**: an inner zone of all regions with a detected outbreak, and a buffer zone of regions adjacent to detected outbreaks. Mink should be culled on all farms within the inner zone, while lockdowns and transportation bans should be mandated in both the inner and buffer zones.
3. Funding of scientific research on Cluster-5 should be increased.
4. Public educational materials on safety and hygiene should be developed and distributed.

Stage 2: Prevention (1 - 10 years)

The goal of the prevention stage is to reduce the future risk of zoonotic disease outbreaks on mink fur farms through a gradual redesign of regulations.

1. Implementation of training on testing and reporting in regards to possible outbreaks; creation of regulation for employer-provided personal protective equipment standards for mink handlers
2. Redesign of national animal welfare policy to address physiological and ethical needs of mink
3. Regular audits of mink farm employees and animal conditions to guarantee compliance to regulations.
4. Mink fur farm operators must complete a training program and oblige to audits for legal operation.

Furthermore, this stage intends to reduce operating mink farms in Denmark to lessen the inherent zoonotic threat of mink fur farming through the use of the strict regulation to render mink fur farms economically non-viable.

Learn more about Cluster-5 from: [ECDC](#), [WHO](#), [SSI](#), [Aarhus University](#)