

Fur Real: Did the COVID-19 Pandemic Signal the End of the Mink Farm?

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Detection of the SARS-Cov-2 virus (which causes COVID-19) in European mink farms led to mass cullings of mink and fur bans in Israel, Europe, and some U.S. cities. U.S. mink pelt trade and production were already in decline pre-pandemic, while global exports of fur goods were increasing steadily. A growing list of production and sales bans alongside steady demand for fur goods (of which mink is the primary fur material) in Asian markets leave the direction of the global industry uncertain.¹

The U.S. and Global Industry:

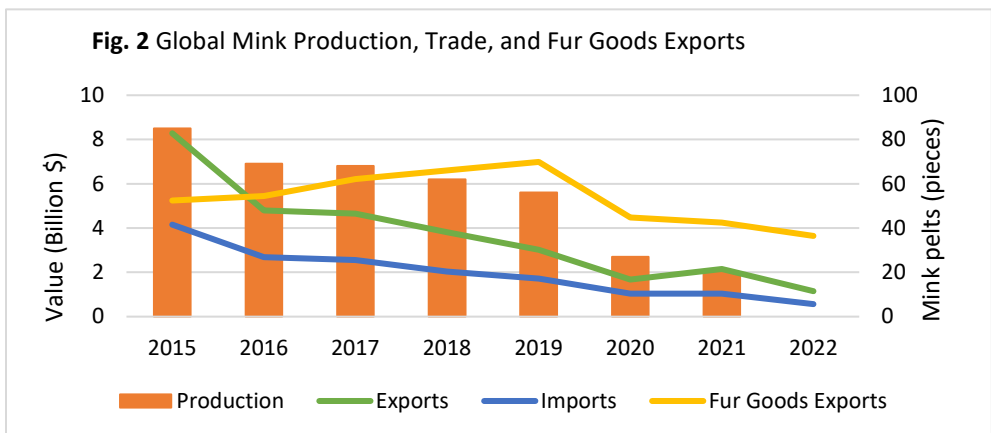
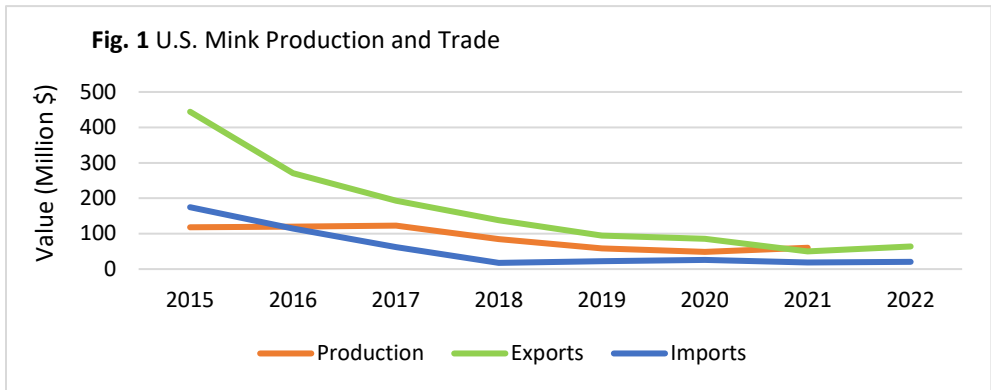
The United States is the fifth largest producer of mink pelts in the world. From 2015–19, U.S. mink pelt exports, imports, and production declined, fig. 1. As of 2021, the United States had about 100 mink farms that produced nearly \$60 million worth of pelts.² In 2022, U.S. mink pelt exports were \$64 million, down 33 percent from \$94 million in 2019 but up slightly from \$50 million in 2021.

Pre- and post-pandemic, the global export value of mink pelts was mostly in decline (except in 2021), fig. 2, largely responding to pelt prices. China is the world’s largest producer of mink pelts, followed by Denmark, Poland, and the Netherlands.³

The United States, South Korea, Hong Kong, China, and France are the largest downstream users, accounting for 55

percent of global imports of fur goods (including finished mink coats) in 2022. Pre-pandemic, the global export value of fur goods had climbed steadily, bolstered by Asian demand. However, from 2019 to 2022, the value of global fur goods exports declined 55 percent due to COVID-19 related retail closures, decreased demand, and price effects from reduced input prices.⁴

COVID-19 and Mass Culling: The Netherlands first detected the SARS-Cov-2 virus in two mink farms in April 2020, quickly followed by outbreaks throughout Europe, the United States, and Canada.⁵ Virus prevalence in mink raised alarm once a variant spread from human handlers to mink, mutated, and spread back to humans on a



Sources: USDA NASS, *Mink*, 7/18/2022; USITC Dataweb/U.S. Census and S&P Global for HS 4301.10, 4303.10, 4303.90, accessed 5/17/2023; Hansen, “Global Fur Retail Value,” 5/27/2021.

Note: U.S. export value includes wild-caught mink and farmed mink inventories. Most pelts are sold at auction on consignment, which may explain global import/export discrepancies.

¹ Mink were 82 percent of traded value of raw furskins in 2021. OEC, “Raw Furskins,” accessed 5/16/2023.

² USDA NASS, *Mink*, 7/18/2022, 1; Ferguson, “The Fur Flies,” 5/10/2022.

³ Hansen, “Global Fur Retail Value,” 5/27/2021, 3 and 7; S&P Global, “Data Extracts,” accessed 4/6/2023.

⁴ S&P Global, accessed 4/6/2023; Hansen, “Global Fur Retail Value,” 5/27/2021, 7–9.

⁵ Fenollar et al., “Mink, SARS-CoV-2, and the Human-Animal,” 4/1/2021; CDC, “Sars-Cov-2? Covid-19?” 5/25/2021.

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Danish farm.⁶ Testing at 16 affected Danish farms found 67 percent of farm employees and residents contracted a COVID-19 variant originating from mink.⁷ Within the first year of the pandemic, 170 mutations were identified in mink farms across the world.⁸ In November 2020, Denmark culled more than 17 million mink across 200 mink fur farms to prevent further mutations among mink and spread to humans.⁹ The European Commission approved 1.74 billion euros in relief to mink farmers in April 2021 to compensate for the slaughter and subsequent production loss.¹⁰ Remaining EU farms introduced stricter biosecurity and safety measures for employees handling mink.¹¹

Accelerated Fur Bans: Pre-pandemic, European imports of fur goods (including finished products of mink pelts) experienced a downward trend, in part due to anti-fur consumer sentiments. As COVID-19 unfolded, EU production and sales bans accelerated.¹² As of March 2023, fourteen European Union members banned fur farming. Norway shut down the last of its mink farms in January, ahead of its original 2025 deadline.¹³ Outside of Europe, Israel became the first country to ban the sale of fur altogether in June 2021.¹⁴ Then in November 2022, British Columbia, Canada announced a phase out of mink production by 2025.¹⁵

The United States has some state- and city- level bans of fur sales in place, and a federal ban made progress in the 2021–22 Congressional session. In 2019, California passed legislation to ban sales of new fur products effective January 1, 2023.¹⁶ Fourteen localities spanning California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, and Michigan have also enacted their own fur bans.¹⁷ In 2022, a ban of American mink sales within the America Competes Act (Sec. 71108, H.R. 4521) passed in the House, but not the Senate.¹⁸ However, five Senators from U.S. mink-producing states noted the low risk of animal to human transmission of COVID-19 in the United States, and that mink farms are family farms that create nearly \$50 million worth of revenue and thousands of jobs.¹⁹ Beyond government actions, an increasing number of global fashion brands have also gone fur-free.²⁰

The Future of Mink Farming: Mink farming has gained a reputation as a public health risk, which has impacted global production of mink pelts. In October 2022, tests on a Spanish mink farm confirmed that mink contracted and spread H5N1 avian influenza among mink, the first-documented mammal-to-mammal transmission of bird flu.²¹ Stricter biosecurity measures lower risk of disease spread to humans on mink farms. Still, mink are uniquely poised to host and spread respiratory viruses.²² Reduced global mink pelt production is expected to continue in the near term. However, the question remains whether dampened production of mink pelts will be more than temporary and whether the United States will respond to global production gaps if downstream demand for mink fur goods rebounds.²³

⁶ Devaux et al., "[Spread of Mink SARS-CoV-2 Variants in Humans](#)," 9/20/2021.

⁷ Pluda, "[End the Lockdown for Animals](#)," 11/30/2020, 171–76.

⁸ Devaux et al., "[Spread of Mink SARS-CoV-2 Variants in Humans](#)," 9/20/2021.

⁹ Kesslen, "[Here's Why Denmark Culled 17 Million Minks](#)," 12/1/2020.

¹⁰ European Commission, "[State Aid](#)," 4/7/2021.

¹¹ Manure transport bans, PPE, and farm visit restrictions. Wolters et al., "[Manifestation of SARS](#)," 8/11/2022, 1754.

¹² [UN COMTRADE Database](#), accessed 4/7/2023; Portala, "[European Fur Imports](#)," 11/25/2022.

¹³ For a full list of countries see Fur Free Alliance, "[Fur Bans](#)," "[Norway shuts down all fur farms](#)," 1/23/2023.

¹⁴ Hernandez, "[Israel Has Become The 1st Country To Ban The Sale Of Most Fur Clothing](#)," 6/14/2021.

¹⁵ BC Gov News, "[Mink farming phase out planned in B.C.](#)," 11/5/2021.

¹⁶ California Legislative Information, "[Bill Text - AB-44 Fur Products: Prohibition](#)," accessed 4/3/2023.

¹⁷ Fur Free Alliance, "[Fur Bans](#)," accessed 4/4/2023.

¹⁸ Congress.gov, "[United States Innovation and Competition Act](#)," accessed 4/4/2023.

¹⁹ Johnson et al., "[Letter to USICA Senate Conferees Re Mink Farming](#)," 4/21/2022.

²⁰ Block and Admunson (Humane Society blog), "[Mink Fur Production Drops](#)," 7/28/2021.

²¹ Agüero et al., "[Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A \(H5N1\) Virus Infection in Farmed Minks](#)," 1/19/2023.

²² Sun et al., "[Mink Is a Highly Susceptible Host Species](#)," 3/19/2021, 472–80.

²³ Hansen, "[Global Fur Retail Value](#)," 5/27/2021; Wisconsin Farmer, "[Finnish Auction](#)," 12/17/2020.

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