

A close-up photograph of two black cats with striking orange eyes, looking directly at the camera. They are positioned in front of metal wire cages, suggesting they are in a laboratory or a fur farm. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of their fur and the intensity of their gaze.

The Case Against Fur Factory Farming

A Scientific
Review of
Animal Welfare
Standards and
'WelFur'

Executive Summary



The global fur industry has grown rapidly, with increasing demand fuelled by growing affluence in developing economies, particularly China and Russia. Worldwide, around 95 million mink and foxes were killed for their fur in 2014. Most fur sold globally is from farmed animals, with Europe and China being the largest producers.

While fur animals are included in general EU legislation on animal welfare, transport and slaughter, **there is no detailed species-specific EU legislation setting welfare standards for animals farmed for fur.** Serious concerns for the welfare of animals farmed for fur were highlighted in the 1999 Council of Europe 'Recommendation Concerning Fur Animals' and the 2001 report of the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare. **Recent scientific studies add further weight to the substantial body of evidence demonstrating that the needs of mink and foxes are not being met in current housing systems and cannot be met in any housing system with the undomesticated animals used by the fur industry.**

Mink and foxes used for fur production are not domesticated

Domestication is an evolutionary process by which a population of animals becomes adapted to humans and captivity. **The most important welfare aspect of domestication is the unique ability of domesticated species to interact with humans in a positive way.**

Although, experimentally, mink and silver foxes can be domesticated, this has not, and cannot, occur on fur farms because changes in the coat that are characteristic of domesticated animals are incompatible with the fur industry's demands. On fur farms, the emphasis is on selection for traits associated with pelt colour and quality, body size and litter size. These animals are not adapted to close contact with humans and cannot be considered in any way domesticated. **Fear of humans in the undomesticated animals used by the fur industry makes them fundamentally unsuitable for farming.**

The welfare of mink and foxes farmed for fur in Europe is extremely poor

Approaches to assessing animal welfare can be broadly summarised as 'biological functioning' (i.e. are the animals physically and mentally healthy?), 'affective (emotional) states' (i.e. are the animals happy/feeling good?) and 'natural/motivated behaviours' (i.e. 'do the animals have what they want?'). **Whichever approach is emphasised, the welfare of mink and foxes farmed for fur is seriously compromised because:**

- **The biological functioning of mink and foxes farmed for fur is impaired**, as indicated by levels of stereotypic (abnormal repetitive) behaviour, fur-chewing and tail-biting/self-injury, physical deformities (bent feet) and high levels of reproductive failure/infant mortality;
- **There is evidence of negative affective (emotional) states in farmed fur animals**, including fear (as indicated by avoidance/aggression towards humans), frustration (as indicated by stereotypies) and boredom/under-stimulation (as indicated by fur-chewing and tail-biting, long periods of inactivity when awake and heightened response to stimuli);
- **Animals farmed for fur are unable to perform many natural behaviours that they are motivated to perform and/or frustrated/stressed by the inability to perform**, such as interacting with water (for mink), interacting with a sand/earth floor (for foxes), using multiple nest sites, and foraging/ranging (as indicated by stereotypic behaviour).

The 'Five Freedoms' are widely used internationally as a framework for animal welfare assessment, legislation and assurance standards. **Farming systems for mink and foxes fail to satisfy any of the 'Five Freedoms':**

- **Freedom from hunger and thirst:** Restrictive feeding of overweight animals in preparation for breeding results in hunger and increased stereotypic behaviour.
- **Freedom from discomfort:** Mink and foxes farmed for fur in cages have very little control over their physical and social environment. Foxes are mostly kept without access to a nest box. Handling procedures cause significant stress and discomfort.
- **Freedom from pain, injury and disease:** Common problems include fur-chewing, injuries (both self-inflicted and from other animals), high levels of infant mortality, deformities (bent feet), difficulty in moving, diarrhoea and inhumane killing methods.
- **Freedom to express normal behaviour:** The small and largely barren cages used to house mink and foxes on fur farms do not allow the animals to swim, climb, run, dig, hunt/forage or range/disperse. Maternal deprivation and social stress can result from abrupt early weaning, isolation in individual housing, aggression in group housing and the close proximity of socially dominant animals.
- **Freedom from fear and distress:** Fear is a major welfare problem for animals farmed for fur because the mink and foxes used on fur farms are not domesticated.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council considers that minimum legal requirements should be such that an animal has a **'Life worth Living'**. Levels of fear, stereotypic behaviour, fur-chewing/tail-biting, physical deformities (bent feet) and reproductive failure/infant mortality clearly indicate that the needs of mink and foxes on fur farms are not being met. Mink are semi-aquatic and show 'inelastic demand' for water (i.e. they will continue to work for access to it, despite increasing costs). Mink accustomed to the provision of water, and foxes accustomed to having access to a clean dry substrate, may show stress when they can no longer enjoy these resources. Access to these resources would clearly be included within the Farm Animal Welfare Council's description of a 'Life worth Living'.

The welfare of mink and foxes farmed for fur is seriously compromised in current farming systems, which fail to satisfy all five of the 'Five Freedoms' and do not provide a 'Life worth Living'. Even if domesticated animals were to be used, current farming systems could not meet the needs of mink or foxes.

European citizens are opposed to fur farming

The fur industry's 'Origin Assured' labelling scheme does not stipulate any specific production standards and unenforceable industry codes of practice are sufficient for a country to be 'Origin Assured'. **The 'Origin Assured' label is used on fur produced in small wire cages, which have inherently low welfare potential and are opposed by the majority of European citizens.** Most consumers would not consider these conditions to be consistent with the scheme's claims of humane treatment.

The majority of European citizens recently polled in ten countries, including countries with substantial fur production, is opposed to the farming of animals for fur in cages. A number of European countries have already implemented bans and there is widespread support for a ban at EU level.



'WelFur' cannot address the major welfare issues for mink and foxes farmed for fur

The European Fur Breeders' Association launched the 'WelFur' project in 2009 to develop on-farm welfare assessment protocols for mink and foxes. These:

- have been **specifically designed around the very serious limitations of current housing systems** and generally reward the *status quo*, even where this is known to compromise welfare, rather than encouraging the development of systems with the potential to provide a higher level of welfare;
- do not adequately penalise practices that **fail to meet existing minimum standards** set out in the Council of Europe Recommendations;
- do not address **inhumane handling and killing methods** and the lack of training for all personnel carrying out killing of fur animals;
- downplay the importance of **serious injuries** that are associated with extreme suffering;
- will underestimate the true levels of **mortality and stereotypes**;
- use **inadequate measures** of hunger, human-animal relationships and positive mental states;
- use complex scoring systems to combine different welfare measures into a single category indicating the overall welfare level, which may allow high scores on some elements to **mask serious failings** on others;
- **will not achieve WelFur's stated aims** of ensuring 'a high level of animal welfare' on fur farms and functioning as 'the new scientific reference' for fur-farmed species;
- do not take account of societal concerns and **score welfare only up to a ceiling of 'best current practice'**;
- would be **misleading** if used as the basis for a labelling system.

WelFur is not able to address the major welfare issues for mink and foxes farmed for fur, the issues associated with inhumane handling and slaughter methods, or the serious inadequacies in current labelling and regulation. The 'best current practice' ceiling makes the WelFur scores of limited value and misleading because 'best current practice' still represents what the majority of people would consider to be an unacceptable level of welfare. Alternative systems with the potential for higher levels of welfare do not exist for mink and foxes.

Conclusion and recommendation

The current regulatory framework for the protection of fur animal welfare in the European Union is inadequate. Enrichment of existing housing systems is not sufficient to address the serious welfare problems inherent in cage systems. The use of undomesticated animals by the fur industry means that fear of humans and difficulties in handling and management would present insurmountable obstacles to the adoption of more extensive systems. It is therefore impossible for the needs of mink and foxes to be met by the fur industry. A ban is the only viable solution to the serious welfare concerns highlighted in this report.

The farming of mink and foxes for fur should be prohibited in accordance with Council Directive 98/58/EC: "No animal shall be kept for farming purposes unless it can reasonably be expected, on the basis of its genotype or phenotype, that it can be kept without detrimental effect on its health or welfare" and the Council of Europe Recommendation Concerning Fur Animals: "No animal shall be kept for its fur if: a. the conditions of this Recommendation cannot be met, or if b. the animal belongs to a species whose members, despite these conditions being met, cannot adapt to captivity without welfare problems."

