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# **FUR FARMING AND INDUSTRY** **CERTIFICATION INITIATIVES**



## CRITICISM OF THE FUR INDUSTRY

For decades, the fur trade has encountered intense criticism for the way animals are raised and killed on industrial-scale, battery cage fur farms. Successive investigations filmed on fur farms around the world reveal animals suffering physically and mentally, and conditions have been condemned by numerous eminent veterinary and welfare bodies and individuals. The European Commission's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW), 2001, for example, stated: "Current husbandry systems cause serious problems for all species of animals reared for fur."<sup>1</sup>

Recognition of the inherent welfare problems of fur farming has resulted in legislation to end the farming of animals for fur in more than a dozen countries across Europe.<sup>2</sup>



“ Foxes and mink farmed for their fur are wild animals, not domesticated and it is impossible to meet their most basic welfare requirements in factory fur farms. ”

Professor Stephen Harris of Bristol University<sup>3</sup>



### LIFE ON THE FARM: A COMPARISON WITH FREE-LIVING ANIMALS

#### MINK IN THE WILD:

- Daily cover territories between 1 and 3km
- Are solitary animals
- Semi-aquatic, swimming and diving are highly significant aspects of their lifestyle
- Stereotypies, such as fur chewing and circling, do not occur in nature



#### MINK ON FUR FARMS:

- Spend their entire lives in a wire mesh battery cage typically measuring 90x30x45cm
- Live extremely near other mink, unable to avoid social contact
- Cannot run, swim or hunt for food
- Deprivation of swimming water results in the same stress level as deprivation of food

#### FOXES IN THE WILD:

- Have complex social lives, form pairs and live in family groups
- Dig dens underground with complex tunnel systems
- Red foxes (territory 0.5-10km<sup>2</sup>) can cover 10km daily
- Arctic foxes (home range 20-30km<sup>2</sup>) migrate 100km in one season

#### FOXES ON FUR FARMS:

- Kept solitary in wire mesh battery cages measuring 0.8-1.2m<sup>2</sup>
- Prevented from engaging in natural social interactions
- Denied the opportunity to run, dig, explore or hunt for food



## INDUSTRY RESPONSE TO WELFARE CRITICISMS

In response to this widespread criticism and bad PR, the fur industry has developed and promoted various welfare certification schemes. Most schemes require little or no more than what is legally required, and others, such as 'Origin Assured' attempt to attribute a 'high welfare' label to furs on the basis that they have come from a country which has animal welfare laws in place, making no attempt to assess the robustness of the laws or the enforcement thereof. All schemes are run and funded by the fur industry.

Furmark, a recently launched additional fur-industry led programme, appears to be an attempt to unite the various schemes under a single brand by 2020.<sup>4</sup> There does not appear to be any overarching criteria for assessment and certification of welfare across jurisdictions.

It should be noted that although Furmark appears to bring all of the existing certification schemes together, it makes no reference to assessment or certification of fur farms in China, one of the world's largest producers of animal fur.

## WELFUR

A project initiated and paid for by the European fur industry, Welfur is a voluntary on-farm assessment and certification project to enable certified farms to sell their furs through the main auction houses. Arguably the most detailed of all the fur assurance schemes, it was initiated in 2009 with a stated objective of "securing the future for the fur trade".<sup>5</sup> Implementation began in 2017 with a stated aim to assess around 4,000 farms across Europe by December 2019. According to Fur Europe,<sup>6</sup> "to date [February 2018], 84% of European farms adhere to Welfur".

A Council of Europe Recommendation<sup>7</sup>, published almost twenty years ago, recognised the welfare problems inherent to battery-cage housing systems and called on industry to act. The Recommendation includes a call for research to "develop housing systems ... to enable animals to fulfil their biological needs... *"[that] shall include the need for ... [for mink] access to water for thermo-regulation and for swimming and other social and exploratory behaviour"* and, for foxes, *"the opportunity for*

*climbing, hiding, digging, jumping and other exploratory, territorial and social behaviour."*<sup>9</sup>

Instead of attempting to facilitate such radical changes, the Welfur certification scheme focuses on identifying the 'least bad' welfare in the context of the entirely deficient battery-cage systems, and then labelling and rewarding this as 'good'.

Under four principles (good housing, good feed, good health and appropriate behaviour) protocols have been established by which mink and fox farms are evaluated by inspectors, who are ultimately paid, in full or in part, by the fur trade by the fur trade. The measures include scores for the presence or absence of a range of welfare problems commonly found on fur farms including:

- unhealed minor injuries
- major healed lesions (e.g. missing more than half the tail)
- major unhealed injury (e.g. missing more than half the tail or bone exposed)
- stereotypic behavior
- severely bent feet (in foxes)
- ocular discharge/eye inflammation
- fear and aggression towards humans<sup>8</sup>

The Welfur scoring system, particularly around the presence of serious injuries (healed or otherwise) downplays the severity of these occurrences from animal care, health and welfare perspectives. Animals who are missing body parts such as ears and tails have typically lost them through self-



mutilation or fighting. This indicates not only that the animal has experienced extreme physical pain, but also that its environment is not conducive to good mental health. Furthermore, the tolerated incidence of disorders is extremely high; measured as a percentage across the farm, welfare problems are given an 'alarm threshold', over which a 'farm level health plan' is proposed. The 'alarm threshold', for example, for foxes with severely deformed feet is 15%.

Amongst other deficiencies, the scoring system exaggerates the welfare benefits of very minimal (and optional) enrichments, for example the very basic presence of straw or a piece of rope is awarded a 'very beneficial' score. It also uses crude and unscientific methodology to assess whether an animal is in a 'positive emotional state': e.g (for foxes) *"Use a stick made of plastic or wood.... Approach the cage quietly and insert 30 cm of the stick through the cage wall...towards the animal. Stand at least 1 m from the cage but only at a distance where you can see the animal's reaction to the stick. Observe for 10 secs. Then withdraw the stick from the cage."*<sup>9</sup> An animal that "touches the stick in explorative way" is given a positive score for its overall emotional state. Similarly inadequate methods are given for measuring and scoring hunger and human-animal relationships.

Farms are visited three times in the first year for assessment purposes, once in each of the three production cycle periods (winter, spring/summer, autumn). The assessors' visits "will need to be announced [in advance] to the farmer"<sup>10</sup> rendering them significantly unreliable as a snapshot of normal conditions.

The assessment scores are "combined to calculate criterion scores standardized across countries... Criterion scores are then combined to calculate principle scores, and the farm is classified to one [of four] Welfur categories: best current practice, good current practice, acceptable current practice, or unacceptable current practice."<sup>11</sup> This aggregation of different welfare measures into a single category, combined with a complex calculations obscuring individual outlier results, could easily lead to the masking of serious and persistent welfare shortcomings on farms. The implementation of Welfur is paid for by farmers and auction house customers. A "certification fee of 0.10€ per fox, finnraccoon



## Opinion of the European Commission's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW)

In 2001 the SCAHAW evaluated conditions in the European fur farming industry and published a report critical of the status quo.<sup>14</sup> For fox cages it states: "The typical fox cage does not provide for important needs of foxes. In particular, it imposes monotony of the physical environment, restricts physical exercise and species-specific behaviour such as digging." For mink cages it states: "The typical mink cage with a nest box and wire mesh floor impairs mink welfare because it does not provide for important needs. Particular problems are limited locomotion and stimulatory possibilities, lack of opportunity to climb, go into tunnels or swim, and inability to avoid social contact." The SCAHAW report further points out that abnormal behaviour is not unusual in farmed fur animals, and quantifies stereotypical movement patterns in mink as "widespread".

[raccoon dog] or mink skin of European origin" was applied from February 2017 onwards. This is in spite of the fact that welfare assessment protocols for raccoon dogs are yet to be published.<sup>12</sup>

There appears no intent to publicly publish results of the assessments or, indeed, a list of certified farms. Furmark's marketing brochure states: "The results of the certifications will be available for brands as well for public authorities if the program is implemented into the national legislation."<sup>13</sup>

## SAGA FURS

Saga Furs is an auction house, a product development company, and a marketing organization for furs from Nordic countries. The company states that it is committed to “ethical fur production”.<sup>15</sup> Its largest shareholder is the Finnish Fur Breeders’ Association (ProFur), which devised and launched the Saga certification programme in 2005. WelFur assessment protocols are included in that certification. In November 2015, 884 of the 965 farms in Finland were Saga certified, as was 99% of all fox production and approximately 90% of all mink production.<sup>16</sup>

The Finnish Fur Breeders’ Association has been reluctant to make its certification rules public, citing it as an internal inspection system, which makes analysis impossible. However, the certification programme has come under criticism domestically, the Finnish Veterinary Association stated that fur marketing should not give the misleading impression that certification would guarantee a better level of animal welfare than the minimum required by legislation, or that the certification would guarantee the welfare of the animals.<sup>17</sup>

Despite claiming to follow the recommendations of the Council of Europe in regard to the welfare of fur animals, in practice not all Saga certified farms do. For example, some fur farms in Finland and other Nordic countries do not provide hiding places for animals (such as nesting boxes), and for some species (e.g. Chinchilla) the minimum space provisions are also not met.

## FAILING THE FIVE FREEDOMS

Fur farms routinely fail to satisfy the “Five Freedoms”, the internationally recognised framework for basic farm animal welfare assessment. Wild animals on fur farms can suffer significant stress and fear from handling; pain from deformities and injuries from fur-chewing, as well as from inhumane killing methods; and critically suffer from housing that does not allow animals to express key natural behaviours. Farm animal

## COUNTRY CASE STUDIES: VIOLATIONS RECORDED BY NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

The fur industries in Norway and Finland have both experienced decades of scrutiny and criticism for the welfare conditions in their fur industries, and the existence of certification schemes such as Welfur and Saga have failed to prevent repeated violations of even basic animal welfare standards.

### NORWAY

Serious concerns have been expressed by Norwegian officials about the fur industry, with state regulators reported in 2016 as saying “it’s difficult to secure animal welfare at the [fur] farms”.<sup>20</sup> According to the same news report, “New figures from Mattilsynet [Norway’s food and animal safety agency] show violations in nearly half of the inspections conducted ... inspectors remain shocked by the animal injuries and neglect they continue to find.”

In 2014, the treatment of animals on fur farms, broadcast on national television, was described by an official at Mattilsynet as “completely unacceptable”.<sup>21</sup> The agency called it “shocking” that such animal abuse continued despite stepped-up efforts to control it. “In no other industry have we had such an increase in control and followed up problems as vigorously as in this one,” Ole Fjetland of the state agency Mattilsynet told newspaper Dagsavisen. “We don’t know what else we can do.” Of the same footage the Agriculture Minister stated that the “serious violations” of animal welfare laws were

welfare science has now developed more sophisticated welfare assessment tools, such as Mellor’s ‘Five Domains’<sup>18</sup> model, which emphasise the need for meaningful measurements of positive welfare states in addition to simply recording the absence of negative states. By contrast the fur industry’s ‘gold standard’ of assessment places no emphasis on determining whether animals are subject to positive experiences and states.

“ Today’s fur farming is based on keeping active predators in small wire mesh cages. Fur farms are run in a way that prevents the animals from being able to satisfy their basic natural behavioural needs... the time has come to consider banning fur farming in Norway. ”

Norwegian Veterinary Association<sup>24</sup>

“unacceptable,” as were the attitudes expressed by fur farmers portrayed in the video showing “a lack of respect for animals and regulations.”<sup>22</sup> The newly-elected (2018) Norwegian government has recently stated it will end fur farming.<sup>23</sup>

### FINLAND

Recent statistics show negligence on 66 per cent of the 38 farms (out of approximately 900 farms) inspected by the authorities in 2016.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, statistics show that as the coverage of the inspections increases, so does the incidence of negligence. Common breaches included lack of enrichment materials, cages that were too small or had too many animals in them, and exposed wire on cage doors on which animals could injure themselves.<sup>26</sup>

### The impact of stricter welfare standards

In Sweden, the introduction of animal welfare requirements in 1995 that would allow foxes to be active, to dig, and to socialise with other foxes has effectively rendered fox farming economically unviable. In Germany in 2017, stricter regulations, including the provision of swimming water for mink and the provision of an area to allow foxes and raccoon dogs to dig, were adopted. Like Sweden, it is understood this will render fur farming economically unviable.<sup>19</sup>



### THE ‘MONSTER FOXES’ OF FINLAND

In the wild, arctic foxes weigh 3 to 4kg, yet some caged foxes have been recorded as weighing over 20kg, yielding significantly more fur but suffering debilitating welfare problems. Welfare concerns of oversized foxes are a longstanding problem that the Finnish industry has elected not to resolve, putting profit before welfare. A 2014 report published by Maatalouden tutkimuskeskus, the Finnish Agricultural Research Center, stated that up to 86 per cent of farmed foxes were suffering from bent feet and over 20 per cent of the animals were significantly obese.<sup>27</sup>

Film of over-sized foxes<sup>28</sup> with folds of excess skin and eye problems, struggling to move in their small cages, was filmed at five fur farms in Finland in spring 2017. The resulting public and media outrage led the Finnish Fur Breeders’ Association to issue a press release<sup>29</sup> via Fur Europe stating: “We do not accept oversized or sick animals. Animal welfare and responsible breeding is the foundation for us all.” Despite such assurances, Finnish animal protection organisations have had no difficulty in finding fresh evidence of obese foxes since, including most recently in March 2018.

## CONCLUSION:

**The farming of wild animals in tiny wire cages is inherently, and demonstrably, inhumane. Existing certification schemes do not address the fundamental inadequacies of the battery cage systems ubiquitous to the fur industry, and so fail to provide animals with lives worth living.**

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