

MINK FARMING

in the United States



Mink have been farmed for fur in the United States for 130 years, since shortly after the Civil War. As a result, today's stock are truly domesticated animals, well suited to the farm environment. In part because healthy mink produce the finest fur, they are also among the best cared-for of all farm animals, enjoying nutritious diets, comfortable housing and the best in veterinary care.

In 2004, 326 family farms were members of Fur Commission USA. Reporting to the US Department of Agriculture as 296 operations, they produced 2.56 million pelts valued at \$124 million. According to the best estimates for output in 2005, the U.S. currently ranks fourth in production behind Denmark, China and the Netherlands.

Throughout their history, mink farmers have employed selective breeding to develop a wide variety of pelt colors, many of them either rare or unknown in nature. These include white, plus a host of shades of brown and gray, sometimes with tinges of blue or pink, and bearing such exotic names as lavender hope, sapphire, gun metal and mahogany. But the most popular pelts of all are "black".

North American fur farms were the first in the world to breed "black" mink, which are actually an extremely dark brown, quite rare in nature. So loved are black pelts by the fur industry that they accounted for 45% of all American pelts produced in 2004. And with breeding stock originally imported from the U.S., black mink are now farmed in countries around the world.

Most American fur farms are family businesses, often operated by two or three generations of the same family. A young farmer will typically take time out to gain a college or university degree in agriculture, biology or business, and then begin participating in the management of the family farm, eventually either taking over or leaving to start his or her own operation.

This new operation, however, may still be under the umbrella of the family farm, with the result that one fur farm may actually comprise two or more operations next door to each other.

Life on a fur farm revolves around the natural reproductive cycle of the animals. Mink typically breed in March, and give birth to their litters of young, or "kits", in May. These litters may range from three to 13, but four to five is average. The kits are weaned at six to eight weeks of age. Farmers vaccinate their kits for botulism, distemper, enteritis, and, if needed, pneumonia. The animals molt in the late summer and early fall, after which they produce their winter fur. They are then harvested in their prime in late November and December.

In the wild, most young mink don't survive through the first year. In contrast, a farmer's care ensures that almost all domesticated mink live until the end of the year, when they are harvested. The best of the herd are selected for breeding in the following spring, ensuring that the farmer's stock keeps improving.

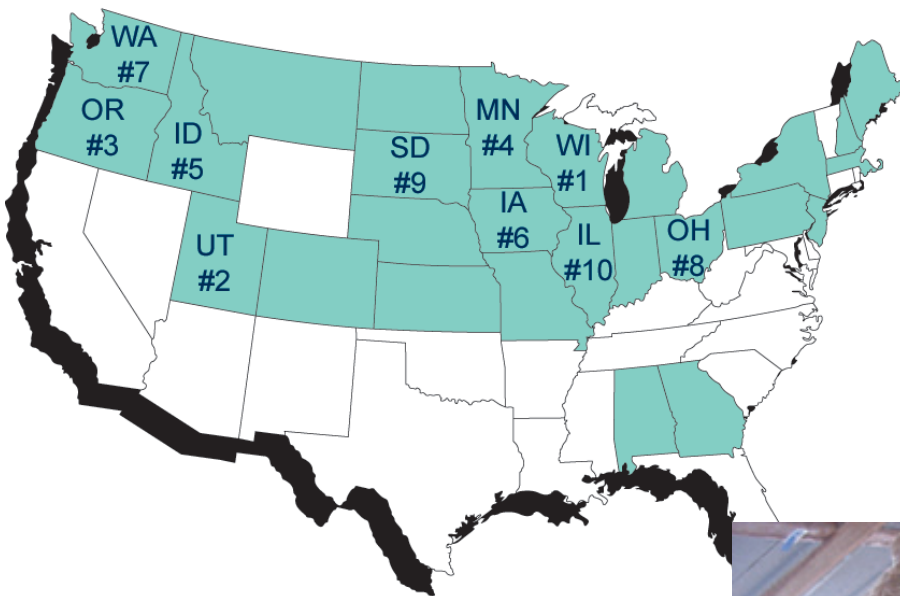
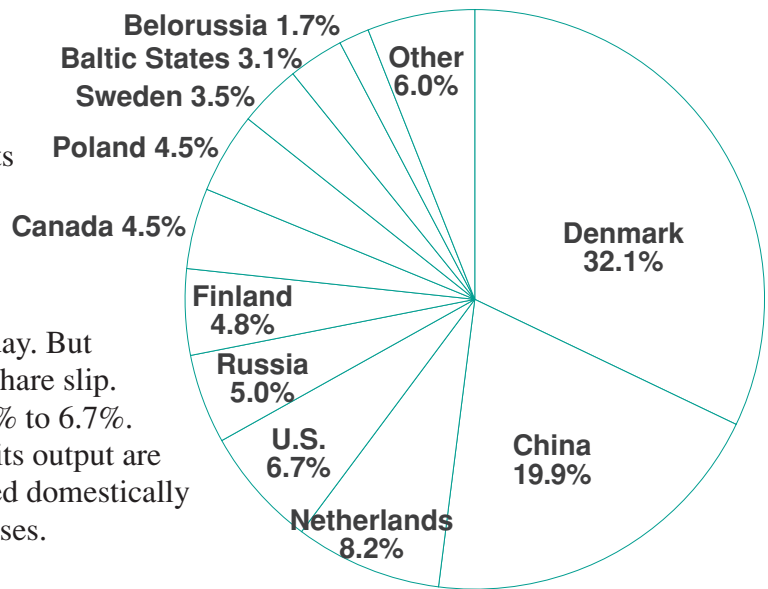
THE FUR FARMING YEAR

JAN.	FEB.	MAR.	APR.
	BREEDING		
			WHELPING
MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG.
		WEANING & SEPARATING	
WHELPING			GROWTH & FURRING
SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
GROWTH & FURRING		GRADING	PELTING

WORLD FARMED MINK PRODUCTION, 2005

(Source: Oslo Fur Auctions)

World mink production varies according to projected demand. From a peak of 42 million pelts in 1988, output fell to 20 million in 1993. Since then, output has risen steadily, topping 40 million again in 2005. Leading producer Denmark has gone from strength to strength, increasing its share from 22% in 1983 to 32% today. But other traditionally big producers have seen their share slip. The U.S., for example, saw its share fall from 16% to 6.7%. The rising star, meanwhile, is China, but data on its output are a best estimate only since most of its pelts are used domestically and do not pass through international auction houses.



RANKING STATES BY MINK PELT PRODUCTION, 2004

(Source: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture)

Since a cold climate is conducive to producing furbearers with thick coats, mink farming in the U.S. is concentrated in northern states and in the high-altitude state of Utah.

QUALITY FUR FROM QUALITY CARE

Providing animals with humane care is an ethical obligation of all livestock farmers, while for mink farmers it also makes good business sense, since the healthiest animals produce the finest pelts.

As with all America's livestock producers, fur farmers are regulated by state departments of agriculture. In addition to meeting state requirements, fur farmers have developed a comprehensive set of their own standards, in consultation with veterinarians and animal scientists, to ensure the highest quality of animal husbandry. These standards are administered by Fur Commission USA, which is also responsible for ensuring they are revised and updated whenever required by current knowledge of animal care and farm management techniques.

These standards cover:

- Farm Management
- Accommodations (site, sheds and pens)
- Food (nutrition, preparation, distribution)
- Watering Systems
- Health and Disease Control
- Environmental Quality (sanitation, water quality)
- Transportation of Live Mink
- Euthanasia



THE ROLE OF FUR FARMING IN THE AGRICULTURAL CHAIN

The U.S. Department of Agriculture includes mink farming in annual agricultural production statistics and reports, as do most state agriculture departments.

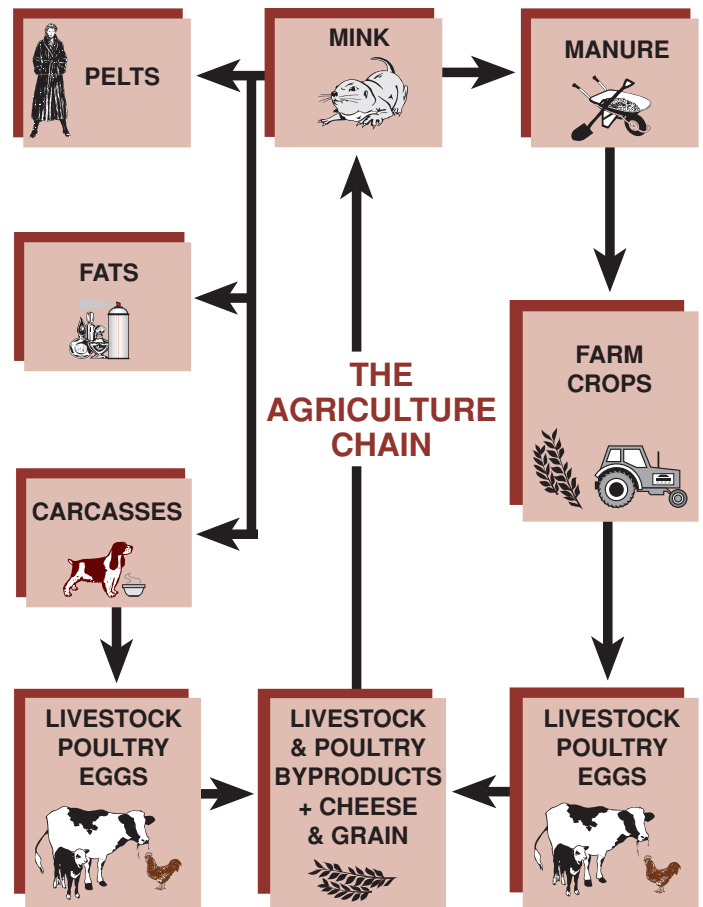
Farmed mink play an important role in the agricultural chain, consuming large quantities of by-products from the production of human food. In producing 100,000 mink pelts a year, one farm in Wisconsin feeds its animals 2 million pounds of expired cheeses and 1 million pounds of damaged eggs. It is estimated that world-wide, fur farms consume over a billion pounds of these by-products annually.

The menu varies depending on what is available locally. In coastal regions, diets are likely to be based on fish. Elsewhere, fur farmers may rely on by-products from meat- and poultry-processing plants, or dairy producers. Diets are also supplemented as necessary with prepared rations sold by animal feed companies.

The by-products described here are unsuitable for human consumption, and those which are not sold to fur farms or pet-food producers must be disposed of, typically in landfills. By buying these by-products, fur farms reduce the waste generated by human food production, and also provide a source of revenue for other agricultural producers, effectively subsidizing food costs for consumers.

Although fur is the primary product of farming, nothing is wasted. An important secondary product is a highly valued oil produced from the mink's thick layer of subcutaneous fat. Mink oil is used to condition and preserve leather, and also in the manufacturing of hypo-allergenic facial oils and cosmetics.

The carcasses are rarely eaten by humans as the scent gland gives the meat a flavor which most people don't



enjoy. But they still have their uses. Some farmers sell them as crab bait, or give them to wildlife preserves, zoos or aquariums. Others will use them to make organic compost. Or they may be rendered down to provide raw materials for a wide range of products, from pet food and organic fertilizers to tires, paint and even cosmetics.

Last but not least, the nutrient-rich manure from fur farms is in heavy demand as a natural crop fertilizer.

HUMANE EUTHANASIA

Farmers are responsible for their animals' care from birth to death. While standards of animal care and farm management are based largely on the expertise of mink farmers themselves, when it comes to euthanasia they adhere strictly to recommendations of the American Veterinary Medical Association. Thus the only method of euthanasia approved for mink by FCUSA is bottled gas, either pure carbon monoxide or carbon dioxide.

When harvest time comes around, a mobile unit is brought to the animals' cages to eliminate stress that might be caused by transporting them long distances.

This mobile unit includes a specially designed airtight container which has been prefilled with gas. The animals are placed inside and immediately rendered unconscious, and die quickly and humanely.

THE ROLE OF FARMER ASSOCIATIONS

With hundreds of mink farms across the breadth of the United States, FCUSA relies on fur-farming associations as vital links to the farmers themselves. Other important links are achieved through local researchers, veterinarians and officers at local and state agricultural departments.

Fur-farming associations organize and fund their own educational programs to help administer Fur Commission standards, and to keep their members apprised of all the latest techniques and technologies.

Typical activities include seminars, field days and live mink shows, at which farmers can exchange information with invited experts in such areas as disease control, nutrition, genetics, husbandry methods and reproduction.

FUR MARKETING IN NORTH AMERICA

In common with the fur industry as a whole, the marketing of mink pelts is an international affair. Working on behalf of American farmers, trade missions promote our product in all the main buying markets, from Europe to the Far East, and through representation at the major international fur fairs in Paris, Frankfurt, Hong Kong, Montreal and New York.

Also closely involved in the marketing of American mink are North America's two major auction houses, the Wisconsin-based North American Fur Auctions which holds its sales in Toronto, and American Legend Auctions, until recently known as Seattle Fur Exchange.

Although most American produce is actually sold at these "local" auctions, buyers come from around the world, and the auction houses play a key role both in attracting overseas buyers and in ensuring the pelts are presented correctly and in the most attractive manner possible.

The wide variety of climatic conditions and available feed across the U.S. result in considerable variations in fur characteristics. But manufacturers of fur garments require large numbers, or "bundles", of similar pelts in order to produce uniform garments. In order to facilitate



Buyers come from around the world to bid on top-quality American fur.

the work of the buyers, auction houses encourage farmers to pool their pelts, so that similar goods can be presented in longer "strings".

Along with farmed product, the auction houses also sell the pelts of wild animals caught by professional trappers, including muskrat, raccoon, beaver and even grizzly bear.

THE MERIT AWARD CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

The overwhelming majority of mink farms in the U.S. are members of Fur Commission USA, and participate in the Merit Award certification program. This seal of excellence is awarded to members who meet the strict criteria set forth by the FCUSA Animal Welfare Committee in its "Standard Guidelines for the Operation of Mink Farms in the United States."

The Merit Award seal recognizes commitment to humane treatment in all aspects of fur farming, including:

- Vigilant attention to nutritional needs
- Clean, safe and appropriate housing
- Prompt veterinary care
- Consideration for the animals' disposition and reproductive needs
- Elimination of outside stress

Inspections to verify compliance are carried out by independent veterinarians, and those farms which pass are authorized to use the Merit Award certification seal until the next mandatory inspection. On the

rare occasion that a farm fails the inspection, the farmer will be required to make changes or relinquish membership.

Strict adherence to the highest standards of animal welfare has made American mink the world's finest. Producing the world's best does not happen by accident. It is a reward for years of conscientious attention to providing the best possible animal care.

