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Taxpayer-funded COVID shots for minks just the latest Nova Scotia industry outrage

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JODI LAZARE • Guest Opinion

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Late last week, as Nova Scotians were tuning out the news and looking ahead to the weekend, the province's Department of Agriculture quietly announced its plan to prop up the mink farm industry, by paying for COVID-19 vaccines for minks.

Throughout the pandemic, we've learned that minks can catch COVID, spread it between themselves, and transmit it to the humans who work on these farms. As part of Nova Scotia's vaccination program, 54,000 doses will be administered to the animals whose pelts will eventually be sold overseas. Meanwhile, at the other end of the country, British Columbia recently announced its plans to phase out mink farming, based on concerns around public health and infectious disease.

The B.C. decision came weeks after the government received a [letter](#) signed by almost 30 infectious disease specialists explaining the health risks associated with intensive mink farming and calling for an end to the practice.

These risks include potential transmission of the COVID-19 virus, influenza, and other respiratory diseases between mink themselves and between mink and humans. As the experts point out, mink farms, and the associated potential development of novel variants, threaten to undermine the province's vaccination campaign and public health more broadly. As in B.C., mink farms are a threat to the health of Nova Scotians.

They are also grossly irresponsible where the environment is concerned. The 2019 short film, *The Farm in My Backyard*, takes a hard look at mink farming in Nova Scotia, exposing the lack of regulatory enforcement and the resulting environmental degradation. The film details how run-off from phosphorus fed to minks to increase their appetites (and the value of their pelts) winds up turning local waterways in Yarmouth County (and presumably other places where minks are farmed) into fetid

green sludge. As one local resident put it, public culverts along the side of the road act as a public sewer for a private industry.

Likewise, unmanageable amounts of manure from large farms with minks numbering in the hundreds of thousands risk creating blue-green algae blooms, effectively poisoning local lakes and waterways to humans and other animals alike (and causing property values to plummet as lakes become unusable).

The recent announcement means that Nova Scotians' tax dollars are going, not for the first time, toward supporting this environmental disaster.

Needless to say, farming minks is the epitome of cruelty. Minks are semi-aquatic animals; access to water is one of their most basic necessities. Fur farms do not provide this. Instead, minks, who in the wild live solitary lives over thousands of acres, are crowded into metal cages, no bigger than a sheet of paper, often with several minks to a cage. According to [footage captured by We Animals Media](#), the results are predictably horrifying: stereotypical behaviours like repeatedly banging against the sides of cages causing painful injuries, potential self-mutilation resulting in animals missing body parts, and possibly even cannibalism. After six months of that life, the animals are killed, typically by carbon monoxide poisoning.

Finally, fur farming is a dying industry. The market in North America and Europe is virtually nil; public pressure has even caused the infamous makers of Canada Goose coats to stop using fur. Other retailers across North America have declared themselves fur-free, to much public fanfare.

Nova Scotian farmers, then, export their products to overseas markets like China and Russia. But even there, fur is falling out of fashion, as the warming climate means less of a need for heavy coats (which can also be replaced with man-made materials) and a resulting drop in prices for pelts. Canadian farmers have felt the impact; [according to the CBC](#), the category of Nova Scotian farms that includes the mink industry has received \$85 million in federal and provincial government subsidies (reported before the latest announcement).

In 2020, then Agriculture Minister Keith Colwell seemed ambivalent as to whether that was a worthwhile investment. And yet, 2021 brought a new provincial government and new taxpayer-funded contributions to the "largest recipient of agricultural aid in the province." Indeed, since January 2021, [at least 12 mink farms have received \\$780,000 from taxpayers, to strengthen their industry.](#)

This situation is nothing short of absurd and Nova Scotians should be outraged about how their tax dollars are being spent. Environmental sustainability and protection are top of mind in the wake of the COP26 summit in Scotland. Vaccination rates (among humans) and adherence to public health measures show that Nova Scotians care about each other's health. And yet, while boasting about beating the pandemic, the government is quietly supporting a polluting, unhealthy, cruel, and unprofitable industry with public money.

But it doesn't have to be this way and the fix is clear: instead of propping up mink farms, the same money can be used to support farmers' transitions to healthy, sustainable and humane work. Only then will this destructive industry come to an end.