

Mink: Industry represents tiny niche in U.S. agriculture

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Sustainable farming

But mink farmers see irony in the bull's-eye on their operations, even as they heed Flynn's warnings to install infrared alarms or improve fencing around their farms. Activists are willing to commit felonies to put mink farms out of business in the name of Mother Nature, but mink farmers argue the fur trade is perhaps as sustainable as any industry in agriculture.

For example, mink are raised on agricultural waste products — keeping spent hens, off-grade eggs, unusable cheese, fish guts, beef byproducts and other protein sources out of landfills. Even minks' manure and carcasses are recycled.

Digesters fueled by mink manure produce power in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. Mink carcasses yield one of the best oils for preserving leather and tires, and are used as crab bait.

"It is widely used, and a lot of people do seek it out," said John Corbin, chairman of the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission.

Most of Mount Angel mink farmer Joe Ruef's mink carcasses go to crab fishermen. Ruef fertilizes his grass seed, corn, wild rice and pumpkin fields with mink manure, and mixes it with bark and other ingredients for a compost sold by local nurseries.

Ruef mixes his own feed, relying heavily on salmon and herring remains from fish processors.

"I joke that we're greener than a lot of the guys who think they're green because they drive a Prius in Portland," Ruef said.

Agriculture's recycler

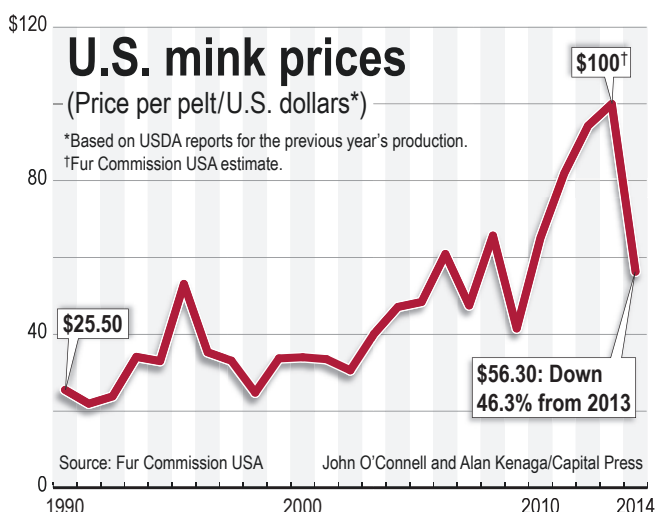
Wisconsin is the top mink-producing state, but Utah boasts the most mink farms and the largest U.S. mink food cooperative.

The Fur Breeders Agricultural Cooperative supplies 131 ranchers in Utah and Eastern Idaho, mixing about 130 million pounds of feed per year.

Mink are bred in early March and born during early May. The busiest seasons for the cooperative are summer and fall, when the mink grow to full size.

"The mink require a lot of protein," said Chris Falco, the cooperative's general manager. "Here in Utah, because we don't have any large sources of any one product, we use a variety of products."

The cooperative employs 55 workers at its various locations, including Utah plants for mixing rations in Logan and Midvale and plants in Washington state, Idaho and



MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI — EO Media Group
Joe Ruef holds a mink at his farm in Mount Angel.

California that prepare, store and ship agricultural by-products such as trout, beef spleens and livers and poultry innards.

The cooperative also buys about 3 million pounds per year of off-grade pet food from Utah and California manufacturers, although the pet food industry also competes with the cooperative when it purchases beef by-products on the open market.

A lunch meat supplier sells the cooperative 10,000-20,000 pounds per day of waste and product no longer fit for human consumption. The cooperative buys corn and wheat from Intermountain Farmers Association, blending the grain with supplemental vitamins and minerals. It also contracts directly with cheese plants and egg producers for their by-products and with Amalgamated Sugar for beet pulp.

Founded in 1939 to prevent competition for food sources among area mink producers, Falco said the coop-

erative provides its suppliers with income for waste products they'd otherwise have to pay to remove.

"It's kind of a double bonus for those farmers and ranchers," Falco said.

Though the cooperative is strictly a food supplier, even it hasn't escaped the notice of the animal rights movement. In 1997, activists set fire to one of its buildings. No one was injured, and the arsonists were prosecuted, Falco said.

Mink's association

Fur Commission USA, funded by a 15-cent assessment on each U.S. mink pelt, administers a humane certification program, whose participants voluntarily agree to exceed minimum requirements for cage density, inspections and veterinary care.

Whelan, the commission's executive director, said about 95 percent of U.S. mink come from certified operations.

"We started behind the eight ball," Whelan said. "Everyone thought we were a cru-



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Joe Ruef discusses the manure collected from his farm in Mount Angel.



Todd Hawkes, manager of the Fur Breeders Agricultural Cooperative in Logan, Utah, watches as water is added to meal in the process of mixing a batch of mink feed.

JOHN O'CONNELL
EO Media Group

el industry, so we had to come out stronger than what the minimums were."

Whelan admits the mink industry is often reluctant to tout its own virtues.

"We have some very violent and criminal detractors," Whelan said. "I want to say what a great business we're in, but I don't want anyone to get hurt."

Eight cents of the assessment per pelt goes to research, such as a recent study concluding infrared lights on alarm systems don't disrupt mink breeding, contrary to the beliefs of many mink farmers.

Whelan said U.S. mink prices have been strong for the past decade, with a few "hiccups," and available pelts have consistently sold out.

Fur prices reached record highs in 2013, when the average pelt price was about \$100. The price surge prompted the Chinese to double their production to nearly 40 million pelts. Prices plummeted to about \$50 per pelt in 2014 due to overproduction and a mild winter in China that reduced the demand for mink coats. An economic meltdown in Russia also caused demand there to tumble.

The U.S. sold about 3.9 million pelts from the 2013 crop in 2014, Whelan said. Less than halfway through the current auction season, Whelan said prices are up about 20 percent from last year, though

it's too early to tell if the trend will continue.

Whelan said fur has been incorporated into a wider range of products than ever before, including ear muffs, hand bags, shoes and even furniture. In the fashion industry, more than 500 designers are now using fur, compared with fewer than 40 a decade ago.

"It's no longer just your grandma's full-length coat," Whelan said. "There's fur for every price point now."

Farm security

Lew Palmer's farm was attacked in October of 1997. With help from other mink farmers and neighbors, Palmer managed to round up all but 75 of the more than 4,000 mink that animal rights activists released.

But Palmer, a fourth-generation mink farmer in Preston, Idaho, said it took years to recover from the attack. Hundreds of mink later succumbed to disease, weakened by the shock, Palmer said. His mink also struggled to breed the following spring. Palmer didn't have the wherewithal to improve his security until a few years ago, after consulting with Flynn.

"He put a bug in my ear, and then I got all sorts of engineers out there," Palmer said. "It basically comes down to a bunch of money, trying to find a security system that won't

have any false alarms."

Palmer has also hired people to patrol his sheds at night.

In Mount Angel, Ruef also consulted with Flynn, and added more security cameras. But Ruef won't be deterred from showing off his farm to school children and others who request tours. He believes ignorance about the fur industry poses the greatest threat.

In addition to traveling around the country to assess mink farms, Flynn maintains a database, tracking protest locations and animal rights activities to warn producers when they could be at a heightened risk. Flynn noted the extremists have published a document called "The Final Nail" — essentially a blue print for attacking farms — and now have access to names and addresses of virtually every producer.

Flynn assures producers that the days of finding security by keeping a low profile in a rural location are over. Flynn asked that his picture not be used with this story to avoid being recognized by animal rights activists.

"I'm not afraid to call these (activists) terrorists because you can see the negative effect it has on these families, where a farmer is sleeping in a pickup truck in the evening hours instead of being at home with his wife," Flynn said.

Dog park: 'This isn't forever, I hope'

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"This isn't forever, I hope," said LaMear, who had wanted a dog park. "But, certainly for this year, it's just not possible."

City Councilor Zetty Nemlowill said the decision would be disappointing to the many residents, including the Astoria Dog Park Friends, who had worked for a year to find a place where dogs would be free to romp off-leash. But she said the city rightly looked at the cost before moving forward with a project.

Nemlowill said the city is "already stretched thin. And we simply do not have the money to maintain a dog park right now. So I think that you are making the right move in bringing this up, Mayor."

The reversal is the latest example of LaMear's nimble leadership style since she took power as mayor in January. Rather than dig in, the new mayor has shown a willingness to set aside her own policy preferences when the circumstances or political realities shift.

LaMear, who had long defended prosecuting drunken-driving cases in the city's Municipal Court, agreed to move the cases to Circuit Court after calculating the political will of the council. The retired librarian, who made the renovation of the Astoria Public Library the focal point of her campaign last year, stepped back from a plan to demolish the old Waldorf Hotel as part of the library's expansion after preservationists urged the city to spare the hotel.

"I would like, once again, to thank the mayor for her flexibility to step back from an item that she has been passionate for and say, 'This may not be the right time or the right place to push it forward,'" Councilor Drew Herzig said of LaMear's shift on the dog park. "I think that that really reflects well on her leadership and I thank her for that."



ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian file

Lorna, right, a yellow Lab and pit bull mix, rumbles around the dog park at Eben H. Carruthers Memorial Park with Oly, middle, a yellow Lab, and Max, a Boston terrier. The dog park is the closest place to Astoria where pups can romp off-leash.

Room to roam

The Parks and Recreation Department had explored several sites for a dog park, including land near Alderbrook Lagoon known as "Stinky Beach" and Tapiola Park, but encountered strong neighborhood opposition.

After a town hall meeting at City Hall in March, an interim dog park at John Warren Field looked to have community support. The city was in talks with the hospital to use the football field for five years or longer.

But the issue was left off the Parks and Recreation Board's agenda in late March, when the board was expected to make a recommendation on a dog park to the City Council.

The city plans to use a portion of the football field as a staging area for the next

phase of a sewer improvement project. Angela Cosby, the director of the Parks and Recreation Department, said the city would have had to decide whether to share the field or wait until early next year to open a dog park.

Money, however, was the more pressing problem. The Parks and Recreation Department has been criticized for not adequately maintaining city parks, so some residents questioned why the city would add to that burden with a dog park.

A dog park could be included in a new master plan for parks that the city might pursue over the next year.

"I'm sure there will be a large number of people who are pretty upset," Cosby said, "and then also a large number of people who are thinking, 'Oh, that makes sense.'"

Burials: Money from fees, interest from city's fund has not kept pace with maintenance costs

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Several people with loved ones buried at the cemetery have grumbled to the city about its appearance. The city has promised perpetual care through an irreducible fund.

Money generated by the fees and interest from the fund has not kept pace with maintenance costs, forcing the city to subsidize Ocean View with about \$56,000 each year.

"This fee increase would begin closing the gap," City Manager Brett Estes told the City Council.

City Councilor Russ Warr, who owns Astoria Granite Works, which makes headstones and grave markers used at the cemetery, declared a potential conflict of interest before his vote in favor of the fee increases. His business could be impacted by the fee hikes.



JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian file
Ocean View Cemetery opened in 1898. It has more than 16,000 plots.