

Debate on prohibiting mink farms centers on coronavirus concerns

BY MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI

Capital Press

SALEM — Arguments over whether lawmakers should prohibit mink farms in Oregon recently centered on whether coronavirus risks from such operations are either unjustifiable or exaggerated.

Proponents of Senate Bill 832, which would ban mink farming within nine months of enactment, argue the animals pose a unique danger for spreading the coronavirus and amplifying its hazards to humans.

Mink are the only species known to get infected by the virus and then transmit it back to people, said Jim Keen, a veterinarian who serves on the veterinary council of the Animal Wellness Action nonprofit.

The animals are housed in stressful conditions under which the virus can more readily spread, adding to the risk of new variants developing, Keen said.

The species is also considered a top candidate for the “missing link” that transmitted the coronavirus between bats and humans, starting or accelerating the pandemic, he said.

Oregon has only five mink farms. One facility had a coronavirus outbreak, during which three of the animals escaped, said Lori Ann Burd, environmental health program director for the Center for Biological Diversity nonprofit.

Aside from the threat to



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press file
Joe Ruef holds a mink at his farm in Mt. Angel. Ruef recently testified against a bill that would ban mink farming in Oregon.

public health, escaped mink can imperil related species such as river otters, fishers and martens, Burd said.

“This is not an attack on Oregon agriculture. This is looking at the threat five operations pose to us,” she said.

John Easley, a veterinarian and mink industry consultant,

countered that mink farms have developed new biosecurity measures aimed at thwarting coronavirus spread, in collaboration with federal and state agencies.

A vaccine against the coronavirus has been developed for mink, which will further reduce the chances of trans-

mission and mutations, Easley said.

Denmark, which euthanized 17 million mink after an outbreak, had 1,100 mink farms in an area one-third the size of Wisconsin, so the odds of virus transmission among them was much higher, he said.

Even so, the animals clear the disease quickly and pose a minimal threat to the public health, Easley said. “The decision to cull an entire industry was not warranted. The science did not support that.”

Opponents of SB 832 claimed that battling the coronavirus pandemic is merely a pretext for animal rights organizations to ban fur production, which has long been their aim.

The bill’s critics also argued that prohibiting a single agricultural sector would set a terrible precedent for the state’s farm industry.

Mink farmers testified that provisions in SB 832 that would provide them with loans and training could not compensate for the loss of their operations.

Joe Ruef, a mink farmer near Mt. Angel, said his family has been in the industry for 50 years and would have no other uses for the associated equipment and would squander valuable genetics if the bill passes.

“We make every effort to keep our employees safe and our mink safe,” he said.

Oregon could ban fake green labeling on nonrecyclables

BY CHRIS LEHMAN

The Oregonian

Oregonians would have an easier time figuring out what they’re allowed to put in their curbside recycling bins and what they must trash under a measure that’s scheduled for a vote in an Oregon Senate Committee on Thursday.

Senate Bill 582 would prohibit the use of the triangular “chasing arrows” symbol on plastics products sold in Oregon unless they are on a state-approved list of items that can genuinely be recycled.

Supporters call the proposal “truth in labeling.” The idea is to make recycling more financially viable by reducing the amount of nonrecyclable material that ends up in recycling centers and also reduce the market for plastic goods that appear recyclable due to their markings but in practical terms are not.

It’s a problem that intensified after China banned imports of most types of second-hand plastics in 2018, which disrupted American recycling markets.

Following that change, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality formed a stakeholder group to look at ways to make the state’s recycling program more sus-

tainable.

Ironically, the chasing arrows symbol was originally designed to increase the rate of recycling. But supporters of the bill say product manufacturers ended up putting the symbol on nearly everything to appear environmentally responsible.

Waste collectors and local governments tell residents to ignore the symbol and instead sort items based on the shape of the container. That kind of guesswork is what backers of the measure are hoping to eliminate.

“Oregon’s current labeling law ensures that our customers are confused about what is recyclable,” said Kristian Mitchell, executive director of the Oregon Recycling and Refuse Association during a February hearing. “The labeling directly contradicts the message that collectors and local governments use with customers about what materials belong in the recycling cart.”

Manufacturers are cool to the idea.

“Packaging is not made for just one state, or just one country, for that matter,” wrote Jeff Koch, president of the American Packaging Corp. Oregon’s requirement “may not be compatible with all U.S. or global sales.”

Arch Building

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Janice Bell said she was looking for an up-and-coming downtown for Arome’s second location, and Redmond felt like the perfect fit.

She and her husband already loved visiting Central Oregon for recreational purposes, Bell told The Bulletin. And they preferred the smaller feel — and lower real estate prices — of downtown Redmond, compared to downtown Bend.

“I think that Redmond is just the right size: It’s accessible, still easy to park, there’s room for growth,” Bell said before the meeting. “It’s also more affordable — there’s no way we could buy a building in downtown Bend. It’s just not in reach for us.”

Bell told the Redmond City Council on Tuesday that she expects to hire six employees to run the Arome store in Redmond, with salaries ranging from \$15 to \$25 an hour.

The store will also host cooking events with local chefs, and sell goods from locals, Bell said.

“We love as much as possible to cater our business and make it feel like a good fit for the community,” she said. “If

there’s anybody in the local community who makes custom butcher blocks, or rose-serum coffee, those are all things we’d like to (sell) in Redmond.”

The city is giving Arome two \$49,000 loans to help with renovating the Arch Building, said Arnold. One must be paid back within 10 years, but the other will be forgiven as long as the property stays active as a retail operation.

“What (the city) didn’t want to see is a building improved, but nothing actively happening in it,” Arnold said.

The total renovation project — which includes fixing the building’s electrical, plumbing and ventilation systems, as well as adding an accessible bathroom — will cost an estimated \$912,000, according to city documents.

Bell already has a planned opening date for Arome’s Redmond location: Oct. 1.

“We can’t wait to get started and get working,” she said. “I think it’s going to be a fun addition to downtown Redmond.”

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Virus

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Gov. Kate Brown said last week that a “fourth wave” of infections was hitting Oregon.

“This virus is at our doorstep — our numbers are rising and we are back on alert,” Brown said during a Friday press conference.

After falling steadily since January, new cases bottomed out in late February at 249 per day on average. The case count rose to an average of 419 cases per day at the end of March. During the winter spike, daily average cases in early December topped 1,500.

If residents stop wearing masks, practicing social distancing and limiting their contacts, the number of cases could double by next month, according to OHA forecasts.

“These are still concerning numbers in their height and obviously the direction they are going,” Allen said.

The virus reproduction is up above 1:1 for the first time since January. It is getting close to the levels that led to the two-week lockdown in December. However, Sidelinger said it was unlikely that the kind of infection growth seen at the end of last year will occur again because of the growing number of vaccinated people. New infections are increasingly in younger age groups. They are less likely to suffer severe illness or death than those 65 and over.

Oregon is six to eight weeks away from having availability of vaccinations equal demand. By late May or early June, there will be more vaccine than people seeking

COVID-19 across the U.S.

A variant of the coronavirus first identified in Britain is now the most common strain circulating in the United States. More than 200 strains of the virus have been identified circulating in the U.S., but CDC officials say B.1.1.7 is causing about 27% of new cases, according to the agency’s latest data.

VACCINES: More than 108.3 million people, or 32.6% of the U.S. population, have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some 63 million people, or 19% of the population, have completed their vaccination.

CASES: The seven-day rolling average for daily new cases in the U.S. increased over the past two weeks from 53,651 on March 23 to 64,791 on Tuesday, according to Johns Hopkins University.

DEATHS: The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. decreased over the past two weeks from 821 on March 23 to 774 on Tuesday, according to Johns Hopkins University.

— Associated Press

shots, OHA reported. It took from late December to March 3 for 1 million shots to be put in Oregonians’ arms. The state passed 2 million shots this week, just a month later. The state has topped 40,000 shots per day three times now and is averaging about 35,000 daily shots. Most are the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, which require two doses given about a month apart.

Senior demand for vaccine is waning.

Older people made up the vast majority of COVID-19 deaths in Oregon, and the rest of the nation. Allen said over 70% of people 70 and older have been vaccinated, with the 30% unvaccinated including those who declined to get shots. But as the age groups drop, the demand is slowing. Only 65% of residents 65-69 have been vaccinated. In some rural parts of Oregon, the number is under 50%. While the inability to get to a vaccination site accounts for some of the lower than expected figure, there is a significant portion of the age group that does not want to get vaccinated now, vaccinated at all or is waiting for the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

“That seems to have semi-topped out” Allen said of demand in some areas.

The state originally allocated each county an amount of vaccine equal to its percentage of the state’s population. But with widely differing levels of demand across the state, supplies will be redirected in the near future to places where demand is high but supply is low.

Sidelinger and Allen said they are concerned about the recent increase in infections, but believe the worst can be over if residents don’t act as if the pandemic is over. The increasing number of vaccinated people will “bend the curve” back down as long as masks, social distancing and hygiene recommendations are followed. To those feeling “stir crazy” to get back to something close to normal, Sidelinger said the fastest route was to not let up so near the end.

“These changes are a for-now thing, not a forever thing,” Sidelinger said.

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