



Fur Free Britain: the case for a ban on the import and sale of farmed fur

Ensuring animals have a good life by advocating on their behalf

Key facts...

- ★ **The RSPCA wants to see a ban on all imports and sales of fur in the UK. Fur farming has been illegal in the UK for 20 years, but there is nothing currently in law to stop farmed fur from overseas being imported and sold in the UK market.**
- ★ **A blanket ban of this nature could be compatible with WTO trade rules because there is no domestic production of farmed fur in the UK and the 'public morals defence' could also be used. Some targeted import bans on certain types of animal fur already exist.**
- ★ **Fur farming is associated with appalling welfare conditions for the animals involved, particularly in countries with lower animal welfare standards or no animal welfare laws at all. They are kept in cramped, barren cages all their lives and may be slaughtered using inhumane methods too.**

The issue

Farming animals for their fur has been banned in the UK for 20 years. The bans introduced by the various Governments across the UK¹ in the early 2000s were all introduced on ethical grounds based on public support for a ban. Fur farms had been declining for a number of years and by the time of the ban only 13 remained. The ban was strongly supported by the RSPCA for ethical and animal welfare reasons. However, there is nothing currently in law to stop farmed fur from overseas being imported and sold in the UK. In 2019, £56,182,755² worth of fur and fur products were imported into the UK. This demonstrates the extent to which the UK is thus still complicit in the practice of fur farming and 'outsourcing' cruel practices. A ban on importing and selling farmed fur in the UK would correct this.

Welfare concerns

Each year around one hundred million animals are bred and killed on fur farms around the world. Numerous scientific studies have shown the behavioural needs of mink and foxes, the main species farmed, cannot be met in fur farms³. The mink, foxes and other animals are kept in barren wire battery cages, with little opportunity to exhibit natural behaviours or enjoy much quality of life. Fur bearing animals such as foxes and mink are omnivorous or carnivorous and their natural behaviour is to range over considerable distances in the wild to forage and hunt for food. Mink are also aquatic. The denial of their ability to exhibit natural behaviours in this way can result in stereotypic behaviour and self mutilation, indicators that their welfare is compromised⁴. Their instincts and basic needs means they are highly motivated to perform the same activities as wild animals.

The animals may then be killed in horrific and inhumane ways, particularly in countries with no animal welfare laws. For example, in China, animals are often clubbed to death and sometimes even skinned while still alive. In other parts of the world, mink are gassed to death, and foxes and raccoon dogs are electrocuted.

Over the past year, human health and welfare concerns have joined animal welfare as a reason why fur farming around the world should stop. A recent European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) report⁵ has

¹ The Fur Farming (Prohibition) Act 2000 applies to England and Wales, the Fur Farming (Prohibition) (Scotland) Act 2002 to Scotland and the Fur Farming (Prohibition) (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 to Northern Ireland.

² Figures obtained from UK Trade Info:

<https://www.uktradeinfo.com/trade-data/ots-custom-table/?id=23c5a89d-3820-42d6-becc4-487924e19f4a> (accessed 29/03/21). Figures for 2020 are available but are not representative due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on global trade flows.

³ Mason, G.J., Cooper, J., & Clarebrough, C. (2001) Frustration of fur-farmed mink. *Nature* 410:35-36; European Commission (2001) *The Welfare of Animals Kept for Fur Production*. Report of the Scientific Committee. Report of the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare.

⁴ Nimon & Broom (1999), Mason & Latham (2004) Can't stop, won't stop: is stereotype a reliable animal welfare indicator? *Animal Welfare* 13:57-69

⁵ EFSA et al (2021) Monitoring of SARS-CoV-2 infection in mustelids

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linked intensive mink production with Covid-19, resulting in mass culling of mink in Denmark and France and the suspension of mink farming in Italy and Sweden. Covid-19 and the threats of future diseases passing from animals to humans present another compelling reason why it's time to end fur farming across the globe, something that a UK ban on importing farmed fur would contribute towards.

Why we need a ban



The UK already has four import bans on certain types of fur: fur from endangered animals, fur from dogs and cats, fur (and other products) from seals and fur from animals caught in inhumane traps⁶. All except the ban relating to endangered species are inherited from EU law, nationalised under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

As the value of fur and fur products still being imported into the UK shows, however, whilst these piecemeal bans may address some specific animal welfare issues related to the production of fur they do

not stop the UK being complicit in the much bigger issues posed by the fur farming industry as a whole. Only a full ban on the import and sale of farmed fur will do that. There are also concerns about the efficacy and enforcement of some of the existing import bans, especially that related to inhumane trapping, which a full ban would resolve.

Now that the UK has left the EU, we also have the opportunity to go further than EU law allowed and introduce a full import and sales ban on farmed fur. Any such ban would have to be drafted in such a way as to be compliant with World Trade Organisation (WTO) trade rules - and the UK Government would have to be prepared to defend it against potential challenges at the WTO.

The RSPCA believes that it is possible for a ban to be WTO compliant. Because the UK has no domestic farmed fur production such a ban could not be seen as unfairly favouring UK producers; there simply are no UK producers to favour. Although the ban would be a restriction on trade it could be defended under the public morals defence, whereby a country can argue that an otherwise trade distorting measure, such as an import ban, should be permissible because of the strength of public feeling in their country. This was the argument used successfully by the EU to defend its ban, which the UK has inherited, on imports of products from seals against a challenge at the WTO. There is a wealth of evidence of the strength of public feeling against fur farming in the UK which could be used to defend any future import ban. For example, in one recent poll 72% of respondents said they wanted to see a complete ban on the import and sale of fur⁷. This and the two decade long fur farm ban would be sufficient for the public moral test is be passed

Bans on the import and/or sale of farmed fur already exist elsewhere in the world. For example, India has an import ban on mink, fox and chinchilla furs which has never been challenged at the WTO. The US state of California has a complete ban on the sale of fur (coming into force in 2023), introduced after several of its largest cities, including Los Angeles and San Francisco, passed their own sales bans.

#FurFreeBritain

The RSPCA has joined forces with the Humane Society International/UK to support the #FurFreeBritain campaign, calling on the UK Government to introduce a complete ban on the import and sale of farmed fur. You can find out more about the campaign here: <https://www.furfreebritain.uk/>

<https://efsa.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.2903/j.efsa.2021.6459> (accessed 26/03/21)

⁶ The ban on imports of furs from animals caught in inhumane traps does not apply to furs from the USA, Canada and Russia due to a settlement with these countries agreed by the EU to avoid a challenge to this measure at the WTO.

⁷ YouGov 4-5 March 2020

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