

FUR FARMING

An Appraisal of the Problems and
a Statement of Recommendations



One of 12 committee reports prepared by representative producers in cooperation with staff members of Oregon State College and other agencies. Adopted at the statewide agricultural conference March 27-29, 1952.



August 1952

Federal Cooperative Extension Service
Oregon State College
Corvallis

Foreword

A State Agricultural Conference was held at Oregon State College on March 27, 28, and 29, 1952, at which reports of 12 major committees were discussed and approved at public forum sessions. This publication contains the report of one of those 12 committees. Reports of the 12 committees are to be issued in the following publications:

Agricultural Relations	Oregon Agriculture 10
Dairy	Oregon Agriculture 11
Farm Crops	Oregon Agriculture 12
Farm Forestry	Oregon Agriculture 13
Fur Farming	Oregon Agriculture 14
Horticulture	Oregon Agriculture 15
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The purpose of this state-wide conference was to take stock of the present situation in the agriculture and rural life of the state and to indicate probable trends and desirable developments over a period of years ahead. Members of the 12 committees were private citizens who were invited by the Extension Service to participate in this activity and who willingly donated their time and paid their own expenses to take part in a series of committee meetings during the year preceding the conference. It is felt that these reports contain the considered judgment of a representative group of citizens who carefully studied available facts in arriving at the recommendations presented. They are being published by Oregon State College as a public service for use by individuals and groups who may wish to consider these facts in planning their own future activities.

Statistical data have been checked by Extension Specialists in Agricultural Economics Information and are based on the most recent available reports of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, U. S. Department of Commerce and other sources deemed reliable.

F. L. BALLARD
Associate Director

Fur Farming Committee Report

1952 Agricultural Conference

March 27, 28, and 29, Corvallis, Oregon

Summary

The fur farming industry is important to Oregon as a specialized, highly technical field which this committee estimates contributes to the state and to many family groups a yearly revenue of approximately \$3,500,000.

Mink farming, because of continued market demand and consumer popularity, is the most important Oregon fur industry.

Oregon is particularly suited for fur farming since its marine fisheries provide cheap protein for fur animal food.

A knowledge of nutrition, genetics, sanitation and disease control is needed in order to be successful in this technical, luxury field.

Recommendations of the fur farm committee included those regarding little or moderate expansion, an economic survey of the industry, a wider research program, support of cooperative agencies, education for legislation, and suggestions to future fur farmers.

Oregon's Fur Industry Situation and Outlook

The fur industry in Oregon has developed from the establishment in the 1920's of a limited number of animals into the thriving, stable industry that it is today.

Early development in the fox industry led to rapid expansion during the late 1920's and early 1930's, due to immediate improvement in the quality of foxes brought from the wilds and raised under ranch conditions. However, after the peak years of 1938-40, the fox industry in Oregon, as well as all over the nation, has declined. During the past ten years, there has been little or moderate demand for fox pelts and consequently no demand for breeders.

The mink industry in Oregon became important in the late 1920's with the establishment of several mink farms in conjunction with fox farms throughout the state. The number of ranches reached a peak of 600 during 1940. The 1930's saw a definite increasing interest in mink as a full-time, profitable business which would sup-

port adequately a family group or groups. The peak in production of the mink industry, then dependent upon standard dark mink pelts and breeders, occurred about 1939. During the World War II period, mink farming was curtailed to a great extent because of feed and labor problems. Mutation mink, which were for the first time produced in quantity in 1940, gave to the mink industry new impetus; and expansion in numbers of mink kept and pelted rapidly increased from 1945 to the present time. During the period from 1945 to 1952, there has been a definite trend toward more mink being raised on fewer ranches. Mink for the past decade has been the only fur raised in the United States which has maintained market demand and increased in popularity.

In Oregon, there are also farm-raised nutria, muskrat, beaver, and chinchilla; but, until these industries are on a pelt value basis, their real economic value cannot be ascertained.

Present status of mink farms in Oregon

In 1950, the fox industry in Oregon had declined to thirteen ranches raising 360 foxes according to the National Fur Farm Organization Board. There has been no apparent gain up to this time, and it does not appear that the fox industry will expand markedly in the near future.

In 1945, approximately 130 ranches were keeping 16,700 breeder mink throughout the state. More than 42,500 mink pelts and 650 breeders were sold in 1945; the value of these marketings was about \$1,197,000. Unofficial estimates indicate that in 1950, Oregon rated 8th in national production of mink when 152 ranches kept approximately 30,482 breeder mink, which produced 73,146 kittens. The value of the mink pelts in 1950 has been estimated by this committee at \$2,250,000.

The average Oregon mink farm today keeps from 200 to 400 breeding females, which produce each year approximately 800 to 1200 kittens. Fur farms in Oregon are considered to be of moderate size with a few farms exceeding 1000 breeders. The average farms cover from 1 to 3 acres of land and are located in four general sections of the state. Clatsop, Tillamook and Columbia counties account for the largest number of fur farms in the state, with Multnomah and Marion counties containing a great number of the remainder. The most limiting factor in the location of these farms is the available food supply. Settling on the coast of Oregon, as most fur farmers have, has given them fish supplies near enough to their farms as to be economically available to them for mink feed. Nearness to this food supply has, in turn, made a *constant* supply of fish

readily available for mink food, and it has become more profitable to emphasize this cheap source of animal protein in comparison to horsemeat and tripe. Oregon now supports one of the nation's leading fur industries because of this constantly available source of marine fishes for mink food.

Supplements to the fish portions of the mink rations may be horsemeat, tripe, condemned beef liver, other byproducts of the meat packing industry, and cereals. Availability and proximity of these products and of the fish supply, upon which fur farmers are entirely dependent, spell the difference between profit and loss and survival or liquidation to the fur farmers in Oregon.

There has been a definite trend toward emphasis on mutation mink production rather than standard dark mink production, which for so many years was the sole source of revenue for the mink rancher. Many ranches, large and small, now contain very few or no dark mink since the average pelt price for them has remained rather constant while some of the numerous mutations, newly introduced, bring large sums both as breeders and as pelts.

Shortly after the introduction of mutations, many millions of dollars were brought into the state through the sale of breeder mutation mink to neighboring and eastern states. During recent years, the sale of breeder mutations has fallen off, and the sale of their pelts has caused the income of this state's fur farmers to reach a level of approximately \$2,750,000 as estimated by this committee. The greater part of the total mink ranches' income is now from pelt sales; whereas in 1946 and 1947, breeder sales constituted the major portion of that income.

Why Oregon is a fur farming state

The principal reason for Oregon's place in the nation as a mink producer is the marine fish supply readily available to ranchers for mink food. These fishes provide for mink a cheap source of protein, which appears to be adequate when moderately supplemented with animal proteins. Heavy demand for these fish is being recently felt because of new market openings in Wisconsin and other states where the food supply for mink, which has been mostly horsemeat, is now less available to fur farmers.

Oregon's moderate climate has proved to be very conducive to raising good quality mink. Some fur auction houses prefer Oregon mink since they feel that some of the finest are produced in Oregon coastal regions.

Relatively low-priced coast lands have led fur farmers to settle in that territory. Since many fur farmers have settled on the coast of Oregon, prospective ranchers frequently establish there.

Improvement program

Oregon has been a leading state in the improvement of mink, especially of quality. Most fur farms in this state have remained of moderate size and depend for their profit upon quality instead of quantity, as is not the case in some states where many thousands of mink are produced each year. Oregon ranchers have been especially progressive in originally raising mutations in quantity and in becoming the main source of breeding stock for the principal newly introduced mutation mink. Fur ranches from this state have consistently averaged above many other states in mink pelt averages due to the care taken in feeding and handling the stock.

The fur ranchers have several cooperative units to which the majority of them belong. The Oregon Fox and Mink Association has been a leading medium by which a great part of the progress in research and information has come about. This state association is composed and strongly supported by four local units: the Lower Columbia, Tillamook, Multnomah, and Marion County units. The purpose of the state association is to act as a clearing house for problems suggested by the units. It is here that ideas are crystallized into action, principally in the legislative, educational and research fields. The state association has a voice in national fur farm affairs through its director on the National Board of Fur Farm Organizations.

Most fur farmers throughout the state actively support two national organizations: the Mutation Mink Breeders Association and the National Board of Fur Farm Organizations. The former, known as Emba, is the national marketing association through which 90 per cent of the nation's mutation mink pelts are sold. It has a far-reaching advertising program to which much credit is given for the success of mutation garments on the market. The National Board was formed to look after the mink ranchers' interests on a national scale especially in initiating and promoting legislation favorable to the fur producers. They gather information and compile statistics regarding the status of fur farming in the nation, so that when legislation is pending in regard to fur farming, this organization takes part in lobbying activities. Information collected by them is given out periodically to fur ranchers. Some of the data in this report are from this source.

Marketing of produce

The major portion of the yearly mink crop is sold as pelts. Most ranches sell through fur auction houses located in Seattle, Minnea-

polis, and New York City. A few on-the-farm pelt sales take place between the fur farmer and private buyers, but it is not the common practice.

Mutation and standard dark breeder mink are sold in limited quantities to local and widespread ranches. Newly introduced mutations which have become popular are, as a rule, sold principally as breeders until their demand drops off as such; then the procedure is to sell these mink as pelts.

Because mink is a luxury fur, the demand for it is extremely vulnerable to economic conditions. The fur farmer, because of obvious or subtle economic changes, stands to gain or lose much each year. Prospective fur farmers must realize this and provide in advance for losses if they are to exist for any length of time as fur ranchers.

Management problems

Management of fur animals on a husbandry basis entails many aspects not considered to be important in other ranching fields. It is a technical field in which unfamiliar beginners are exceedingly vulnerable to the dangers of such an investment. The original outlay is high, in that expensive equipment and buildings are needed, as well as breeding stock, which entails considerable expense—especially if mutation breeders are purchased. There is a definite need, therefore, for sound credit and stable financial backing before the beginner proceeds toward establishment.

There is a particular need for a concrete breeding program and for a wide knowledge of genetics since, in the advent of mutation mink, survival of the fur farmer and his business is dependent largely upon his familiarity with the field of genetics.

A mink rancher must have an appreciation of the aspects of nutrition. Procurement of feed and formulating an adequate, satisfactory diet are major problems to be faced by prospective and established fur ranchers. Background in the field of nutrition, especially since it has been shown that the quality of the animals is directly controlled by diet, is of utmost importance. Emphasis on the nutritional aspects of profitable fur farming has become increasingly apparent through experience and through research.

Awareness of sanitation and disease control methods is important. Disease, such as distemper, and conditions like enteritis can mean extensive losses to fur farmers who are ignorant of their importance. A successful rancher must also be an expert judge of fur quality.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations drawn up by a fur farm committee and have been endorsed by the members of the Oregon Fox and Mink Association as important considerations for established and prospective fur farmers:

1. *The apparent food supply seems adequate to support a very limited expansion by local fur farmers and small, newly established ranches.* Since the available and potential food supply in Oregon for mink is limited and because there is some evidence of over-production of pelts, it is advised that a limited, conservative local expansion of the industry is possible, and an influx of large, established ranches from the central and eastern sections of the country is not desirable and should be discouraged. Prospective fur farmers should have a background of practical experience gained through previous work with established fur farmers. Since this field is highly technical, beginners should be aware of the ramifications of the business and proceed cautiously.
2. *Quality of animals should be stressed, rather than quantity, in pelt and breeder production.* In the near future, the supply of pelts on the market will have caught up with the demand, and only high quality ranches will survive. If ranches in Oregon remain of conservative size, the overseer is in closer touch with each animal than he would be on a quantity basis. Therefore, the quality of each animal is higher. Oregon is noted for its high quality pelts and breeder fur animals, probably due largely to the care given to individual animals.
3. *Because of the proximity to the centers of available food supply, prospective fur farmers are advised to settle in western Oregon.* Since the success of a fur farm depends upon an adequate food supply, a prospective fur farmer should investigate this before locating in any area. Other important points to be considered are: the number of fur farmers in the area, prevalence of diseases affecting mink, and availability (and reasonability) of suitable lands for a location.
4. *It is important that fur ranchers diversify financial investments or build up a reserve capital.* A luxury business, such as fur producing, is quickly influenced by economic rise and fall, and, therefore, fur farmers need to protect themselves through more stable investments or through reserve capital. There is a definite and risky one-crop hazard in the fur business.

5. *Part-time fur farms have proved impractical, and it is advised that except on a very temporary basis this not be undertaken.* Only occasionally is part-time fur farming successful since a maximum amount of time is needed for considerations such as genetics, nutrition, disease and sanitation as they apply to mink. Feed procurement and handling is time-consuming, and distances traveled while hauling fish are usually considerable. These problems make mink farming more profitable on a full-time basis than on a part-time basis.
6. *Fur farmers should be encouraged to support cooperative purchasing organizations for feed and supplies.* Since large eastern fur organizations are already encroaching on the Oregon supply of marine fish, it is extremely important that local fur farmers protect themselves through cooperative contracts. Along this same line, the future development of central feed-mixing plants should be investigated.
7. *All fur farmers should be encouraged to sell through marketing organizations that retain a portion of the pelt receipts for the purpose of consumer advertising and for support of the National Board of Fur Farm Organizations.* This procedure has proved very important in maintaining favorable prices for fur products in order to protect the industry. Market demand for mink garments, in this period when other furs are not in demand, has been attributed to this advertising program.
8. *Research in the industry should be expanded in the state to include wide programs of nutrition and disease study.* Continuation of close associations between fur farmers and the Agricultural Experiment Station through the fur farmers' advisory committee is encouraged. A great need for research in the field of fur farming is evident, and since there has been established an experimental fur farm in the state, an expansion program is desirable.
9. *Efforts should be made to obtain federal funds for the support of the state experimental fur farm.* Since Oregon fur farmers have problems which are peculiar to this district and which have not had research applied to them, to any great extent, it is felt that efforts to obtain federal funds for fur farming research are in order. As the nation's fur farmers become more and more dependent upon the West Coast marine fishes, and upon the research pertaining to their uses in mink rations, federal funds should be requested for furthering such research.

10. *An economic study by an agricultural economist of Oregon's fur farming industry is urgently needed.* The value of the industry to the state and to the fur farmers themselves has never been ascertained and needs to be most urgently since the education of the public and of legislators and researchers as to the value and problems of the industry would be an important step in assuring a more stable future for the industry. Fur farming provides for many Oregon family groups a very adequate income, which value to the state and to the nation needs to be known.
11. *Following this survey, an extensive educational program should be undertaken.* The public should be educated favorably regarding the problems fur ranchers must realize when undertaking this enterprise. In this manner, legislation supporting the industry would be more readily passed if the public were so informed.
12. *In relation to the educational need, a program of complete cooperation with the Oregon Fish Commission was suggested.* The industry is dependent upon the fishing industry. In order to understand each other's problems, cooperation with the Oregon Fish Commission is essential. Since the future of mink farming in Oregon depends upon a sustained yield of marine fishes, the fur farming industry suggests that the nutritional studies being conducted at Oregon State College be closely associated with the investigations of the fishery biologists of the Oregon Fish Commission. A well-managed fishery based on scientific investigations should result in adequate supplies of fishes for mink farming for many years to come.
13. *Since the mink industry is one of those few agricultural industries not subsidized, it is felt that a tariff quota system needs to be legislated.* The mink industry, dependent upon luxury demand, is an industry which is very vulnerable to overproduction. It is not subsidized and has reached a fairly stable production level in the nation. This stabilization has provided for a certain amount of market security which could be easily disrupted in the event of imports of large amounts of quality foreign furs. It is believed that a conservative tariff quota system would be of value in protecting this home industry from overproduction of furs.

14. *The Oregon Fox and Mink Association should be supported since it has accounted for much progress in the industry. Membership in the National Board of Fur Farm Organizations and in the Mutation Mink Breeders Association is also encouraged.*

Fur Farming Committee

ROBERT H. WATT, Chairman, Bay City

HARVEY RONNE, Vice Chairman, Salem

R. E. DIMICK, Secretary, Corvallis

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R. C. JACKSON, Portland

C. A. SMITH, Seaside

C. W. STACEY, Salem

THEODORE JACOBS, Tillamook

EUGENE NADON, Astoria

ANDREW WARIS, Clatskanie

OTTO GEDDES, Imbler

Register of Those in Attendance at Fur Farming Forum

R. C. JACKSON, Newberg

HARVEY RONNE, Salem

DR. JAMES SULLIVAN, Corvallis

PHYLLIS WATT, Corvallis

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