

September 24, 2023

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6

Dear Committee Members

Re: Bill C-275, An Act to amend the Health of Animals Act (biosecurity on farms)

We are infectious diseases specialists from across Canada.

Zoonotic infectious diseases – diseases transmitted from animal to animal and from animal to human and vice versa – present serious risks to commercial farms confining large numbers of animals, as well as to individual workers and the general public.

This is exemplified by recent outbreaks of COVID-19 and avian influenza among animals confined in mink fur farms.

In Denmark and the Netherlands, SARS-Cov-2 virus was spread from workers on the farms to the minks. As the virus spread among the thousands of minks, the virus acquired mutations, and then spread back to humans, foreshadowing further pandemic risks, and prompting culling of the minks for public health reasons.¹

In Spain and Finland, highly pathogenic avian influenza virus H5N1 spread from birds/bird dropping to minks on fur farms. Similar to the outbreaks of SARS-CoV-2 infection, the H5N1 virus acquired mutations concerning for onward spread to humans, prompting culling of the animals for health reasons.² Influenza virus was transmitted to the minks from birds/bird droppings, contaminating their cages or food. Previously, in Nova Scotia, outbreaks of influenza among minks on fur farms were linked to feed containing raw animal meat by-products, including pig lungs.³

Zoonotic and infectious risks can be mitigated to some extent with careful surveillance, vaccination, isolating sick animals, and other biosecurity and infection and control measures. However, these measures are almost entirely voluntary, implemented at the discretion of individual businesses, and are not legal requirements.⁴

Studies evaluating the adherence to biosafety measure on mink fur farms in Ontario have documented that, despite awareness of appropriate practices, very few biosecurity and management practices were uniformly used by the business operators.⁵

Although the practice of feeding minks raw ground lungs from pigs has led to influenza outbreaks on fur farms in Canada, and CFIA advises against this practice, there is no biosecurity legislation to mandate safer practices.⁶

Bill C-275, An Act to amend the Health of Animals Act (biosecurity on farms) is being presented as important legislation in the interests of addressing the health of animals, and existing biosecurity and infectious disease risks on farms.⁷

MP John Barlow, the Conservative Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Agri-Food, who introduced Bill C-275, highlighted the impact bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) has had on the animal agriculture industry, and the devastating impact the introduction of African swine fever (ASF) into Canada could pose.

However, as it is currently written, Bill C-275 does not address these existing biosecurity and zoonotic infectious disease risks. Rather, it would serve as an anti-trespass law, that exempts animal agriculture businesses and employees, and targets undercover reporters, whistleblowers, and activists seeking to document conditions on farms.

As written, Bill C-275 targets only individuals who trespass and enter a facility “without lawful authority or excuse”. The Bill would not apply to business owners or employees who knowingly or recklessly spread zoonotic infectious diseases.

This is not subtle. **This Bill seeks to weaponize genuine concerns about infectious diseases and animal and human health in order to increase protection of private businesses from trespass and bad publicity.** It is an abuse and misdirection of government authority.

This is not to say that people who trespass onto a farm where animals are kept cannot possibly introduce an infectious disease (such as influenza or COVID-19). That is possible. However, it is simply orders of magnitude more likely to occur as a result of workers who have daily close interactions with the animals. Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) data provide further evidence that, in stark contrast to work-related activities, activists trespassing farms have never caused or contributed to a disease outbreak at a Canadian farm.⁸

Of note, in parliamentary debates of Bill C-275, the Member of Parliament Yves Perron stated that activists, who trespassed to bring attention to concerning conditions on a pig farm in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec “*introduced [a disease] into the herd because biosecurity protocols had been violated*”.⁹ This is false. A subsequent investigation of the farm by the Ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec (MAPAQ) documented evidence of inadequate ventilation, accumulation of manure, and suffering animals in need of medical attention.¹⁰ There was no evidence that a novel disease was introduced. In addition, the activists that

trespassed on the farm and exposed the conditions that led to the MAPAQ investigation, have been convicted of criminal offence break and entry, under existing legislation.

Trespassing is illegal. We understand that protests in places of business can be very upsetting. These past 2 years, as health workers, we have experienced anti-vaccine and anti-public health measure protests, and have been vilified by some for our support for vaccines and the use of masks in hospitals and crowded public settings. Legislation was passed to prevent protestors from obstructing people's access to critical health services. However, health authorities have been careful, and under serious scrutiny, to avoid misusing public health threats to infringe on people's rights.

In Ontario and Alberta, Bill C-275 could also be used to target individuals who enter commercial animal breeding, feeding, and slaughter facilities with consent but who covertly record animal suffering and abuse or health and safety risks. This is because these two provinces have agricultural gag ("ag gag") laws that make undercover photography at agricultural facilities illegal.¹¹

Trespassing is illegal, but government mandated oversight and third-party investigations improve animal, worker and public health and safety.

Please consider that one of the largest food recalls in North American history was a result of undercover video at a large slaughterhouse – where workers were documented forcing sick cows, who were unable to walk, into the processing line, by ramming them with the blades of a forklift, jabbing them in the eyes, and using painful electrical shocks.¹² Not only cruel, these actions blatantly violated food safety guidelines in place to prevent transmission of diseases (like BSE).

Bill-C-275 gets it wrong. **This Bill seeks to weaponize genuine concerns about infectious diseases and animal and human health in order to increase protection of private businesses from trespass and bad publicity.** It is an abuse and misdirection of government authority.

Sincerely,

1. Dr. Sara Belga
2. Dr. Jason Brophy
3. Dr. Bryan Coburn
4. Dr. Ryan Cooper
5. Dr. Josh Douglas

6. Dr. Dwight Ferris
7. Dr. Chris Graham
8. Dr. Jan Hajek
9. Dr. David Harris
10. Dr. Michael Hawkes
11. Dr. Philippe Lagacé-Wiens
12. Bayan Missaghi
13. Dr. Torrance Oravec
14. Dr. Tim O'Shea
15. Dr. Shaqil Peermohamed
16. Dr. Abdu Sharkawy
17. Dr. Murthy Srinivas
18. Dr. Shannon Turvey
19. Dr. Victoria Weaver
20. Dr. Jerry Vortel

¹ Greenberg, A. "What's the Deal with Mink Covid?" NOVA. March 4, 2021
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/mink-covid-virus-mutation/>.

² Kupferschmidt, K. "'Incredibly concerning': Bird flu Outbreak at Spanish Mink Farm Triggers Pandemic Fears." *Science*. January 24, 2023. <https://www.science.org/content/article/incredibly-concerning-bird-flu-outbreak-spanish-mink-farm-triggers-pandemic-fears>.

³ Gagnon, C. A., et al. "Characterization of a Canadian Mink H3N2 Influenza A Virus Isolate Genetically Related to Triple Reassortant Swine Influenza Virus. *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* 47, no. 3 (March 2009): 796–799.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19116358/>.

⁴ CFIA. "National Farm-Level Mink Biosecurity Standard." Government of Canada. August 23, 2013.

<https://inspection.canada.ca/animal-health/terrestrial-animals/biosecurity/standards-and-principles/mink/eng/1376667870636/1376667871636>.

⁵ Compo, N., et al. "On-Farm Biosecurity Practices and Causes of Prewearing Mortality in Canadian Commercial Mink Kits." *Acta Veterinaria Scandinavica* 59, no. 57 (September 2017). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13028-017-0326-8>.

⁶ CFIA. "Notice to Industry: Reminder that Feeding Raw Animal Products to Farmed Fur-Bearing Animals Poses a Risk of Transmitting Disease." Government of Canada. August 31, 2023. <https://inspection.canada.ca/animal-health/terrestrial-animals/biosecurity/standards-and-principles/2023-08-31/eng/1693426245867/1693426246554>

⁷ <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/bill/C-275/first-reading>

⁸ Animal Justice. *Animal Advocates, or Poor Farm Practices? Disease Outbreaks and Biosecurity Failures on Canadian Farms 2023 Report*. Animal Justice. 2023. https://animaljustice.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Animal-Justice-2023-Biosecurity-Report_-Animal-Advocates-or-Poor-Farm-Practices2023.pdf

⁹ Italics added. *House of Commons Debates*, May 1, 2023. (Mr. Yves Perron, BQ).

<https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/house/sitting-188/hansard>

¹⁰ "Pigsty Taken over by Anti-Speciesist Activists: Damning Report from MAPAQ [English] - Porcherie Investie par des Militants Antispécistes: Rapport Accablant du MAPAQ [French]." Radio Canada. May 26, 2021. <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1795985/porcherie-porgreg-militants-antispecistes-rapport-accablant-mapaq>.

¹¹ Nickerson, S. "5 Things You Need to Know About Ag Gag Laws in Canada" Animal Justice. February 22, 2022.

<https://animaljustice.ca/blog/ag-gag-laws-in-canada>.

¹² Wald, M. "Meat Packer Admits Slaughter of Sick Cows" *New York Times*, March 13, 2008

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/13/business/13meat.html>.