Classification of animal welfare on mink farms differs between three annual production periods

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Abstract

According to the WelFur assessment protocol for mink, welfare is assessed via three one-day visits; one during each of the three main annual production phases. If one of these three assessments could provide a representative description of the welfare on a mink farm throughout the year, not only would much time and money be saved, it would also provide the farmer with an immediate result. As the same manager is usually in place for all three production phases and as most of the welfare problems associated with mink production are related to management, we hypothesise that assessment in one of the three phases should be sufficient for predicting the overall annual classification of welfare on a farm. Based on the WelFur protocol for mink, data from 19 farms were collected in each of the three production phases: breeders during winter (assessment period one); females and kits in lactation (assessment period two); and juveniles during late growth (assessment period three). The data were recorded by two external assessors per farm, on nine farms in 2011 and ten other farms in 2013, and an aggregated welfare assessment at farm level was calculated for each of the three visits. Data from the three assessments per farm were compared both at criteria, principle, and at overall classification level according to the WelFur mink concept. It appears that the estimated WelFur classification of farms differs between assessment periods, especially as regards to low score-value of the principal ‘Good Feeding’ in the summer period. Scores from periods two and three are needed to predict the full annual score of the four WelFur principles. Based on the results found, we reject the hypothesis that the overall annual classification of welfare of a farm in the WelFur system can be based on one period. A simplification of the WelFur-assessment system may be possible, with the exclusion of the welfare assessment in period one.

Keywords: animal welfare, labelling system, mink production, welfare assessment, welfare score, WelFur

Introduction

Mink production has a fixed annual cycle with three major production phases: preparation of breeders from selection in November to mating in March (phase one); reproduction from mating in March to separation in July (phase two); and growth from separation to pelting or selection (phase three). There are different animal welfare challenges in each of the different phases of production. In phase one there is a risk of very thin animals due to conditioning of juveniles before flushing and mating (Møller 1992; Tauson 1993). There is also a risk of very thin animals at the end of phase two, due to high milk production and mobilisation of body reserves (Hansen 1999; Henriksen & Møller 2015), and a risk of injured kits (Brink & Jeppesen 2005; Clausen & Larsen 2012, 2015). In phase three, there is a risk of injuries, especially after the autumn equinox in group-housed mink (Hansen et al 2014). The time windows for assessing mink welfare within these phases have therefore been defined as the last 6–8 weeks of each phase, eg conditioning of breeders in January–February as assessment period 1, lactation and weaning in May–July as assessment period 2, and moulting and priming of the winter pelt in October–November as assessment period 3 (Mononen et al 2012).

WelFur is an on-farm welfare assessment system for foxes and mink, developed both for certification and advisory purposes (Botreau et al 2012; Mononen et al 2012). There are many different welfare assessment systems developed for different animals (Bartussek 1999; Sorensen et al 2001; Lievaart et al 2005; Main et al 2007; Blokhuis et al 2010; Edgar et al 2013; de Vries et al 2014; Vasseur et al 2015). Most of the welfare assessment systems, such as Welfare Quality® (Blokhuis et al 2010), are based on only one visit per farm in cattle, pig and poultry production. Kirchner et al (2014) claim that animal welfare classification should not be based on single assessments, but suggest repeated assessment to generate rolling averages or to verify assessments that would cause reclassification of farms. In strictly seasonal production systems, the result from a welfare assessment is very dependent on the time of visit (Møller et al 2003), and several visits will often be necessary to provide an overview of the welfare in the different phases of production. A welfare assessment system for management and advisory purposes was developed and tested in Denmark from 1998 to 2002 (Møller et al 2003). The development of WelFur mink was initiated by the European Fur Breeders’ Association (EFBA) in 2009, in order to create a