

## FUR FARMING IN ESTONIA\*

Fur farming began in Estonia in 1924, when the first silver foxes were imported from Norway to Mustajõe farm. In a few years several silver fox farms were established, e.g. at Uuejärve, near Aegviidu; Kohila district, near Saku, and at Koikla, Saaremaa. An ideal climate for fox rearing favoured to a steady increase in the number of silver fox farms – in 1936 – 40, in 1937 – 55 and in 1938 – 60, where the foundation animals amounted to 2,500. Blue fox was introduced in to Estonia somewhat later. In 1936, there were 3 farms, in 1937 – 6, and in 1938 – 8 farms, comprising a total of 650 foundation blue foxes.

Since 1936, American mink farms were established in Estonia: in 1937 there were 8 farms and in 1938 – 17 farms, where the number of minks totalled 270.

In 1938, at the end of the first independence period, a total of 3,420 foundation fur animals were reared in Estonia, including 2,500 silver foxes, 650 blue foxes and 270 minks. The number of nutrias, imported from Germany, was considerably smaller.

To promote fur farming and pelt production, the Estonian farmers have actively participated both in domestic and foreign exhibitions. In 1930, ten silver foxes were taken to the Berlin Fur Fair, where the pelts were awarded the highest quality grade. Before World War II, two exhibitions were organized in Estonia. At the exhibition in 1933, the furs of Raku Fur Farm, our biggest farm up to 1990, were demonstrated. It is noteworthy, that Estonia even used to export fur-bearing animals to Canada and Sweden for breeding purposes.

The Soviet period was relatively successful for fur farming in Estonia. It was mainly due to intensive management of animal breeding that ensured abundant nutrition level and government subsidies. The primary objective of fur animal breeding was to increase the fertility rate and fur production of animals. Less attention was paid to fur skin quality. Since 1981, new species like cage polecat and raccoon dog have also been introduced and are reared in Estonia.

In 1982, a total of 88,256 foundation fur animals were reared on 23 farms of Estonia, including 8,737 silver foxes, 14,399 blue foxes and 65,120 minks. Other species farmed on a smaller scale comprised nutria, cage polecat and raccoon dog. A total of 340,126 fur skins were sold. The furs were sold to cold storages in Moscow and Leningrad, from where they were exported to other countries.

In 1990, the Estonian Fur Association was formed uniting fur animal breeders from 12 Estonian farms – Salutaguse, Audru and Tõrma Fur Farms, Vilde, Vambola, “Rahu eest”, Pihlta, Treiman and Lenin collective farms, Hulja state farm, Võiste and Pärnu Kalur Fur Farm. In 1991, the total number



Demonstration of fur products at the Pedigree Animal Show at Ülenurme  
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of foundation fur animals amounted to 88,037, including 11,101 silver foxes on five, 16,871 blue foxes on nine and 67,103 minks on eight farms.

In a newly independent Estonia, the transition from planned economy to free-market economy initially depressed the development of fur farming as a branch of economy. Several farms faced bankruptcy and were closed down, whereas at the same time some new ones emerged.

Figures for production and sales of pelts varied annually (Table 1).

**Table 1. Estonian pelts sold at auctions**

Year	Silver fox	Blue fox	Mink
1994	23 693	64 922	73 861
1995	28 030	53 619	81 653
1996	18 782	43 111	30 738
1997	29 977	52 784	17 860
1998	9 398	42 720	19 752
1999	18 629	38 939	42 061
2000	11 610	28 407	13 790
2001	10 222	28 389	25 854

Source: Statistical Office of Estonia, Agriculture

In 1994, the association comprised eight farms: Salutaguse, Tõrma, Võiste, ReNa, Pajusti Karusloom, Kuressaare, "Amarol" and Pihlta. Six farms did not join the association.



Red fox is in fashion

A. Juus

Since 1994, the Association Estonian Fur was a member of the Council of the European Fur Breeders' Association, the predecessor of the European Fur Breeders' Association (EFBA). The Association Estonian Fur discontinued its activity in 1999.

The Estonian Fur Breeders' Society was registered in 1996 as a successor of the Society established in 1936. The latter had comprised seven breeding farms – Võiste, "Amarol", Rebasetalu, ReNa farm, Silverfox, Rellam Fox and Pajusti Karusloom, however, the membership had changed by 2001 (Table 2). The Society continued its activities as a member of the EFBA.

In 1998, the Estonian fur farmers established a relationship with their colleagues from Nordic countries after having visited Danish and Norwegian fur farms. Based on the contacts, the Estonian Fur Breeders' Society entered into a co-operation agreement with the Norwegian Fur Breeders' Association. The new partners provided their Estonian colleagues with valuable assistance making up breeding programmes, improving basic herd, introducing artificial insemination, designing a joint feeding project, and upgrading data processing software.

**Table 2. Members of the Estonian Fur Breeders' Society in 2001 and 2003**

Enterprise	County	Silver foxes	Blue foxes	Minks
Balti Karusnahk Ltd	Harjumaa	1200/2140	2050/2735	8600/19 860
Audru Fur Farm Ltd	Pärnumaa	1041/1818	5139/5345	-
OÜ Minkfox	Hiiumaa	-	1623	-
UÜ Rebaseaed	Tartumaa	170	90	-
OÜ Viru Mesila	Lääne-Virumaa	264	45	-
Sirelain Ltd	Harjumaa	237/237	105/196	-
Ala-Kure Farmstead	Põlvamaa	-	51/40	-
<b>Total</b>		<b>2912/4192</b>	<b>9103/8316</b>	<b>8600/19 860</b>

*\*) in 2001/2003*

According to the Statistical Office of Estonia, pelts were sold for about 52 million Estonian kroons at foreign fur auctions in 2001 (Table 3), which constitute nearly 1% of the agricultural production. As a comparison, the data for Finland was 1 to 3%, in Vaasa County even 10%.

In 2001, the government finished subsidising fur farming due to insufficient communication between different institutions.

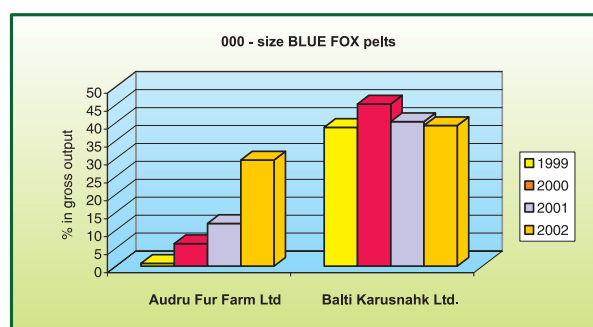
In 2002, the Board of the Association decided to focus on the development of fur farming attempting to involve state institutions as well as third sector organisations. The objective was to promote and enhance the competitiveness of the business, providing the fur breeders with equal opportunities in the EU, compared with farmers engaged in other agricultural activities.

In 2003, within the frames of the Association, a breeding society was formed, comprising specialists of fur farms. Its first undertaking was establishing a breeding register, using the Finnish SAMPO electronic breeding programme.

Following the breeding legislation, the breeding programme with its regulations for silver fox, blue fox and mink was made up and submitted to Veterinary and Food Board in September 2003. The programme, however, was not approved.

In 2003, the number of foundation animals on fur farms of Estonia totalled 32,368, including 4,192 silver foxes on three, 8,316 blue foxes on four, and 19,860 minks on one farm.

There is a clear tendency that the proportion of 000- and 00-size blue fox pelts is increasing in the gross production of the Audru Fur Farm. The same relates to silver fox and mink pelts. In 2003, the share of 00000-size pelts sold by Balti Karusnahk Ltd was 25%, and that of Audru Fur Farm 10%.



**Figure 1. Share of pelts of different size in gross output of two fur farms in 1999...2002**

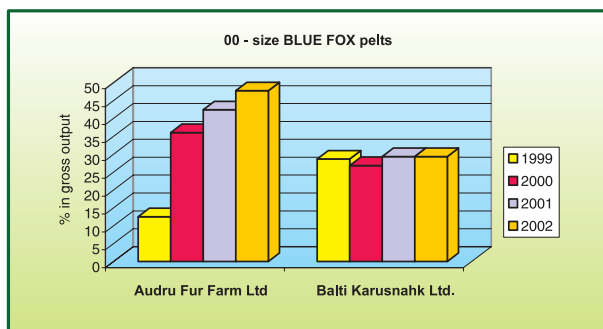


Figure 2. Share of pelts of different size in gross output of two fur farms in 1999...2002

Chinchilla farming has become more popular recently. Estonians have bred chinchillas for over ten years. In April 1994, the first non-profit organisation, the Estonian Chinchilla Breeders' Union was established. The latter has split into the Chinchilla Breeders' Society of Southern Estonia and the Estonian Chinchilla Association.

At present, there are 120 chinchilla breeders keeping 3,500 animals in Estonia.

Chinchilla pelts are sold at auctions at Copenhagen Fur Centre. The chinchilla pelts produced in Estonia hold the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> position in Europe by their quality (Table 3).



Chinchilla farming is expanding in Estonia

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Table 3. Quality of chinchilla pelts sold at Copenhagen Fur Centre in 2003

	Ojaveere*	Estonia	CFC**	Denmark	Austria	Sweden	Finland	Poland	Lithuania
Mean price	243	165	166	212	176	174	156	143	149
incl.high-quality	309	236	220	241	211	231	228	179	181
defective	124	117	116	121	122	123	117	102	107
High-quality pelts	64	41	48	48	60	48	35	54	56
Defective pelts	36	59	52	52	40	52	65	46	44
<b>Total points</b>	<b>7552</b>	<b>7174</b>	<b>7105</b>	<b>7188</b>	<b>7061</b>	<b>7106</b>	<b>7216</b>	<b>6969</b>	<b>6997</b>
colour	109	106		100	106	103	97	105	101
quality	109	107		103	108	107	105	112	110
size	101	102		101	105	102	100	101	106
cleanness	105	105		104	107	106	104	105	101

\*) chinchilla farm in southern Estonia

\*\*) CFC - average of Copenhagen Fur Centre

In August 2002, the Estonian Fur Breeders' Association was established to organize all fur farmers. As a result of the cooperation between the association and the Ministry of Agriculture, each individual fur farmer belongs to the category of 'agricultural worker', which enables him to apply for government subsidies foreseen in development plan measures.

In January 2003, the Rabbit Breeders' Union was established, while in 2004, the Rabbit Breeders' Society of Southern Estonia was founded. The above organizations comprise farmers who invested in rabbit farming as a sideline business. At present, there are 93 rabbit farms with a total of 1,282 foundation animals. The activity of the organisations is focused at purchase of breeding animals, arrangement of breeding work and regulation of feeding.

Membership of the Estonian Fur Breeders' Association comprises the Estonian Chinchilla Breeders' Union, the Chin-

chilla Breeders' Society of Southern Estonia, the Estonian Rabbit Breeders' Union, and the Rabbit Breeders' Society of Southern Estonia. The Estonian Chinchilla Association is working independently.

In February 2004, the Veterinary and Food Board authorized the Estonian Fur Breeders' Association to keep the breeding register and test the performance of chinchillas, rabbits, foxes and minks.

At present the Estonian Fur Breeders' Society and the Estonian Chinchilla Breeders' Union are negotiating in order to integrate their activities and to form a new common fur breeders' organization.

\* Compiled by Olev Saveli on a basis of the data by Malle Aarik and PhD Salme Kangur.