Shelves, platforms and hammocks

Research background, and the Code of Practice requirements

- Research has shown that shelves, platforms or 'hammocks' (curved structures) have several benefits for mink, including creating preferred resting places; allowing mink to escape from cage-mates (e.g. allowing lactating mothers to escape from kits); and reducing kit mortality.
- The Code of Practice therefore requires that all pens with multiple mink must have a hammock, shelf or platform (except pens with jump up or drop in nest boxes, which are exempt).
- The area of this added structure counts as floor space, so it increases a pen's floor area*.
- Typically the shelf, platform or 'hammock' (hereafter 'shelf') should not fill more than 50% of the cage, because at least 50% of the cage area must meet minimum cage height requirements.

Figure 1: Measuring area of a shelf

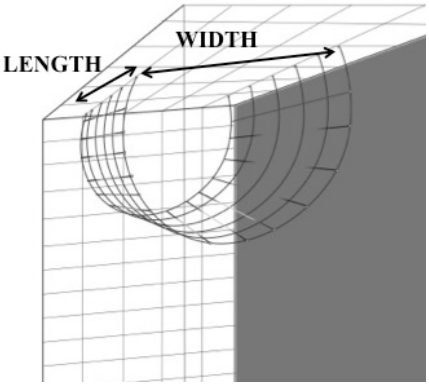

Figure 2: Measuring area of a hammock

What types of shelves are farmers using, and what are their experiences?

In a Canada-wide study, 44 ranches from 6 provinces were consulted about shelves, and the following benefits were reported:

- Apparently calmer animals
- Cleaner mink (when false bottoms are in place)
- In nursing mothers, less mastitis and nursing sickness, improved body condition at weaning, and lower mortality
- Less chewing in kits, and less fighting in juveniles
- Increased percentage of labeled pelts.

Some ranchers expected shelves to make catching difficult, but found it was actually easier (with the right design). Others were worried by mothers placing their kits onto shelves, but this has been rare. Others expressed concern that one mink will hide in the shelf during breeding, but this seems not to have been a problem on ranches permitting shelf access at this time.

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* *To calculate the length of flat shelves spanning a cage, the cage width is counted as shelf length, even if there are small spaces at the shelf-ends (because the mink's body can spill into those spaces) (see image 1).*
To calculate the area of curved structures (hammocks) for width please measure the horizontal width of the hammock at its widest part (see image 2). For hammocks already installed (prior to January 1, 2018), width may be calculated as 1.25 times the horizontal width.

Where and how to install: the basics

- Flat shelves are typically installed flush with the cage's back wall (though installing along a side wall is fine).
- Hammocks are commonly 8-9" long: longer hammocks require catchers to reach deeper in, while shorter hammocks do not offer full support for the mink.

Best materials to use

- Wire mesh is preferable to plastic (stronger, and easier to keep clean and dry).
- 0.5"x1" mesh may be best (0.5"x0.5" mesh is hard to keep clean; while kits and juveniles can get body parts stuck in larger mesh; see below).

Avoiding injuries or fur quality issues

- Kits and juveniles can get body parts stuck in mesh larger than 0.5"x1", with the larger mesh sizes (1"x1.5" and 1"x2") being especially problematic.
- All sharp edges should be smoothed before installation.
- Avoid small gaps between shelf and cage wall that can trap body parts.
- For flat shelves, any support wires running underneath should be offset from the edge by at least 1" to prevent toe injuries *(see image 3).*
- For hammocks, wide forms *(see image 4)* are recommended over tight, narrow hammocks, as less likely to cause rubs in the pelt.
- Even though kits are very rarely observed in shelves until they are 5 to 6 weeks old, "kit guard" may be advisable if shelves are against cage walls, to prevent kits falling though the walls' 2" x 1" mesh.

Design factors affecting catching the mink

- Catching is more difficult if there are two exits, or a large gap between shelf and wall: mink can run in circles through the shelf or wedge themselves in the gap.
- For hammocks, catching seems easier when these are installed lengthwise in the cage rather than widthwise.
- Catching is easier from loose, wide hammocks than from tight, narrow hammocks.

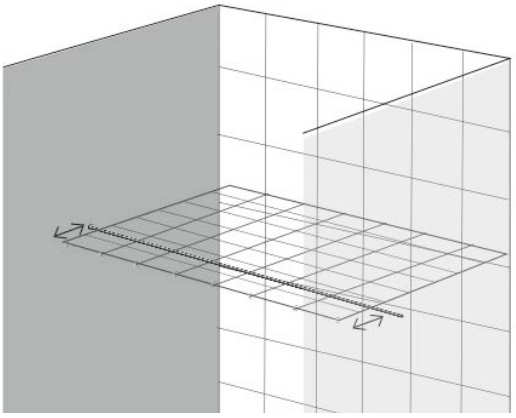

Figure 3: Support wire position

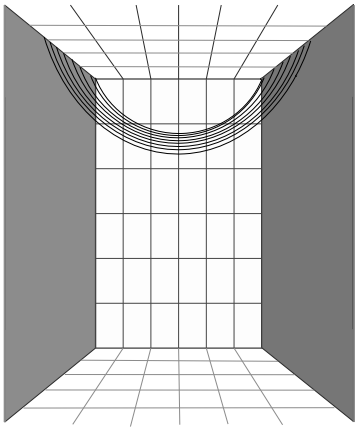

Figure 4: Wide form of hammock