

A report came of one neighbouring farm 15 km away losing two dozen turkeys in a night to a single animal caught in the act. An identical report came from another district. Altogether some 200 poultry were killed in specific instances but much more was alluded to. Following one escape of 50 animals near Warkworth, the area's pheasant and fernbird populations disappeared. In another area fitch were entering houses in search of food. Spotless crake, a shy, uncommon native swampbird once inhabited a swamp virtually on this farm's boundary. Wildlife officers playing tape recordings of spotless crake in this wetland attracted curious ferrets instead.

Another farmer told me of a tethered goat being killed by a tame fitch which regularly appeared on the driveway. His neighbour described one pulling a hen up into a tree leopard-style.

However, farmers weren't just releasing stock. Many failed to install even rudimentary security fencing – required by law – and so escapes continue to this day. Dogs on farms bordering fitch farms are savaged, though they sometimes manage to bring home the culprit. Cats disappear. Farmers find fitch entering open doors looking for breakfast.

One farm I inspected had a beer crate to hold the fitch shed door shut and had holes in the security netting big enough for a large dog to escape through. Furthermore the type of security fence was the one specifically identified by regulations as unsuitable. Everything on this farm was in disarray. Sheets of old iron were haphazardly used to plug gaps. The animals' waste, having never been cleaned to anyone's knowledge, stood nearly a metre under the cages. The farmer admitted the fitches were overcrowded. He is currently seeking planning permission to increase production to 4500 per annum.

The Future

Already fitch breeders have asked to bring in mink. These are identified as the worst ground predator of game known and following releases and escapes in Britain identical to those of fitch in New Zealand, they are now causing millions of pounds of damage annually.

Fitch breeders are bringing from Finland into New Zealand new types of fitch (probably closer to the steppe polecat subspecies) and although each shipment is inspected on the wharf to make sure no mink are included, the possibility of covert introductions by embryonic transplants gives little to be complacent about.

What Is Being Done?

The Department of Conservation has authority to enforce the fitch regulations. However different districts vary in their application, from diligent – giving operators 28 days to install security fencing or face closure – to disinterested. The Auckland office is in press as "having neither the cash nor the priority to monitor ferrets".

The current regulations carry a maximum fine of \$100 which is petty cash for someone with 4,000 or more animals each carrying \$30 pelts.


Realistically the law lacks teeth and needs reviewing. A \$100 fine for releasing hundreds of animals into the wild is no deterrent. The releases we have documented were all made AFTER these 1985 regulations were passed.

Clearly another price crash will produce the same result.

The Acclimatisation Society has called on the Government to urgently review fitch farming. Farming regulations need to be tightened up and properly enforced. A number of specific measures are required:

- Realistic penalties are needed to control irresponsible operators.
- Security fencing must be installed on every fitched farm. This is a requirement under the law that is being ignored by some operators.
- Farmed ferrets must be earmarked to identify ownership.
- All farmers should be required to have live traps on their boundary as a safeguard against escaped ferrets.
- Farmers leaving the industry should be accountable for stock disposal.
- The Department of Conservation must effectively supervise the industry.

The public also has a role to play. If you know of any irresponsible fitch farmers in your area, or of any ferret releases or escapes, inform the Department of Conservation or your local council. Pass the information on to your local Forest and Bird branch as well and make sure you follow up your complaint to see if it is actioned.

New Zealand's indigenous animals are incredibly vulnerable to predators and yet we continue to gamble with the future of our heritage for any get-rich-quick scheme that arises. If our more vulnerable wildlife is to continue to share the mainland with us and not be shunted off to offshore islands, we have an obligation to remove the threats to their survival. Preventing further ferret introductions, either accidental or deliberate, would be an important step. 

**Fitch is the term for a farmed ferret. The ferret is the domesticated version of the wild polecat. It has been bred in captivity since Roman times, but we do not know whether the original stock were European polecats (Mustela putorius) or Asiatic steppe polecats (Mustela eversmanni). To save confusion, tame ferrets and their feral descendants in New Zealand are usually treated as a separate species, Mustela furo. (Information supplied from Immigrant Killers, by Dr Carolyn King).*



The ferret depicted by artist Cynthia Cass doing what it was brought into the country to do: killing rabbits. However, the introduction of the ferret for this purpose has been a failure. (From Immigrant Killers, Oxford University Press).