

Fox farmer decries animal rights groups

by John Holman

Northern News Service

HAY RIVER, N.W.T. — Fur farmers and trappers in Canada both face the economic threat posed by European animal rights groups who would see the market for furs destroyed.

Trappers also feel threatened by fur farmers, said Warren Magrum, who owns a fox farm in Hay River, south of Great Slave Lake. His fox farm is the only one in the Northwest Territories. Some trappers think that fur farmers raise fur-bearing animals because they feel trapping is cruel. That's false, said Magrum.

"Fur farmers are in the same boat with trappers," he said and explained that fur farmers face Europe's organized opposition to trapping and fur farming.

People think fur farming is big business. But Magrum said it isn't true.

He started a fox farm in 1983 at Hay River with his own cash and some funds from the Economic Development Agreement. So far, he said, he hasn't made any money. Looking after the foxes is a full-time job, but it will be a long time before he starts to make a small profit, he added.

Magrum estimated that raising the foxes has cost \$300,000 from 1983 to today.

He began with 50 silver foxes from Quebec, and gradually added more from British Columbia and Alberta.

This year, Magrum sent 337 foxes south to a fur auction. He now has 147 left for breeding, 108 of them female. Last year, he sent 189 off to auction, and the year before that, 39.

Magrum's furs averaged \$264 a pelt in 1987 and \$125 last year.

"This year, prices are down again, so I don't know what I'll get," he said.

He said he needs at least 200 breeding pairs to start making money. All the money he gets from the fox furs goes back into his operation.

In the meantime, Magrum's wife works at two part-time jobs, and he grabs any mine exploration jobs in his free time.

"But that's drying up, too. There's not much exploration work right now."

Foxes mate once a year and have up to three pups. Magrum said he loses 28 percent of the fox pups. Females get an isolated enclosure at the end of their cages to separate them from other foxes. If a stranger goes near the foxes, the mother moves the pups. During this process many are unintentionally killed. Birth defects and disease kill many more.

The Department of Renewable Resources claims fur farming for foxes falls under the Wildlife Act, so Magrum said he abides by those regulations.

"I argue that as far as I'm concerned they are livestock — no different than chickens, pigs and cows," he explained.

"If you take them back far enough you will find that they have been taken out of the wild," said Russ Hall, director of Fur Management for Renewable

NORTHERN NEWS



Resources. Though their wild instincts are lost and they are in captivity, ranch foxes are not genetically different than wild foxes, he added.

To get a fox farming license, adequate living facilities, proper food and water requirements must be met. Implementing these standards can cost a lot, Hall said, but the foxes are in better condition than wild foxes. This means fox farmers do not necessarily earn more money than trappers.

Farmers have to pay for the veterinary fees, food, water, overhead and other bills. They need a high breeding population to make any money.

Fox farmers get a lot of money for their furs because they are slaughtered in their prime.

Over 50 colors of furs can be

achieved in fox ranching. This gives the buyer a greater pick over trapped furs.

Hall explained that some trappers see a threat in fur farming because ranched fur is better than trapped fur. The buyer will not buy trapped furs that are scruffy, small or not in their prime.

As a result, Hall explained, Nordic countries like Scandinavia raise white foxes by "hundreds of thousands." This has brought down the trappers' price on white fox.

The ranch foxes are up to 40 percent bigger than wild foxes and the fur is in better condition. Hall said the ranch foxes are well-fed and taken care of, unlike wild foxes, which may be undernourished and have to fend for themselves.