

Fur trade booms for local auction house

Sales hit \$2 million, prices up 25 per cent, as European designers in hunt for wild product

Peter Mitham

Designers' demand for wild furs is boosting prices for raw pelts at Western Canada's largest fur auction house.

The first sale of 2004 at **Western Canadian Fur Sales** garnered approximately \$1.5 million on a volume of about 30,000 wild pelts, vice-president **Angelo Pappas** said.

Farmed pelts, generally sold privately, boosted total sales to approximately \$2 million.

Prices averaged 25 per cent higher than at the first auction of 2003, when the sales were just over \$1 million.

"We had tremendous prices, big prices," Pappas said.

The February auction is usually the largest of the three held each year, Pappas said. The three sales annually move between 50,000 and 60,000 pelts of animals ranging from squirrel to polar bear. A significant percentage comes from the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

Western Canadian competes for business with auctions in North Bay and Toronto but Pappas said his auction handles the higher-value fox, wolf and bear pelts, while eastern Canada handles more muskrat and beaver.

Though the Northwest Territories government has decided this sea-



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son to route the furs it collects through North Bay, Pappas said it shouldn't mean a decline in volumes for Western Canadian.

He said he's been "bombarded" with calls from trappers in the northern Prairies and as far away as Labrador who want to send their skins through his auction mart because of the higher prices West-

ern Canadian is seeing from its buyers, many of whom come from Europe.

Pappas said over 80 per cent of furs moving through his mart sell to overseas buyers, with the remainder heading to manufacturers in Toronto and Montreal. The number of buyers doing business at the mart from England, France and Germany is

noticeably higher than in previous years.

"There's strong demand right now," he said. "Buyers from Europe are phoning us to see if we can sell before the sales, which we're not going to do."

Alan Herscovici, executive vice-president of the **Fur Council of Canada** in Montreal, said wild furs are growing in popularity among European designers. New techniques for preparing the furs have made them lighter and more attractive to consumers, he said.

The number of designers using fur has increased from about 40 to over 300 since the early 1990s, Herscovici said. Significantly for Canada, many are now looking at wild furs after initially returning to farmed mink and fox furs.

"You get a much broader variety of textures and hair types and natural colours when you add in the wild furs," Herscovici said.

Stronger demand in North America and Europe, he said, is matched by new orders from emerging markets in Russia and China.

Herscovici added that Canada's fur exports have risen from \$143 mil-

lion in 1992 to \$330 million last year.

Herscovici said consumers are more open to wearing fur than they once were following the 1997 humane trapping agreement Canada signed with the European Union and a consumer education campaign which the fur industry committed \$1 million to over the past three years.

"People are not afraid to wear fur now"

-Tracy Cameron Hare, Snowflake buyer

Fashion accessories are using more wild fur, particularly coyote and American grey fox pelts, said **Tracy Cameron Hare**, a buyer with the Vancouver-based retailer **Snowflake**.

"The difference about the wild fur is that it does make it fun," she said. "It's a wilder look."

Key differences are longer, fluffier pelts, whereas sheared beaver with its shorter hair and subdued appearance was common in the heyday of the anti-fur movement.

"Because people are not afraid to wear fur now, they're not afraid for it to look like fur," Hare said.

Hare added that higher prices for wild furs at auction have meant only slightly higher prices for products when they reach consumers. ♦

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