

Farmed Rabbits

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(British Giant rescued from UK Meat Farm)

Farmed rabbits are primarily kept for their meat with Angora rabbits being bred for their wool. In 2008, over 3.5 million farmed rabbits and game birds were slaughtered (the figures for these are combined under the charging regulations and are not collected separately) (1).

Between 50-60% of the world's rabbit meat supply is produced via commercial rabbit farms (2). The UK produces around 2-3 thousand tonnes of rabbit meat per year, and it imports 5 thousand tonnes (mostly from China, Hungary and Poland) (3).

Farmed Rabbit Production & Welfare

The wild rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, is a social, colony animal which lives in burrows. As herbivores, their digestive systems are adapted for digestion of large quantities of forage. The breeds of rabbits most commonly used for meat production are New Zealand Whites, The California, Commercial White and hybrids. Rabbit meat has a high protein and low fat content.

Commercial rabbit farms vary in size from units with over 200 breeding does, a large farm can hold up to 12,000 breeding does (2). Most farms usually breed and fatten all their own rabbits and then send them to specialist packing centres, where they are killed and their carcasses marketed (4).

Males are sexually mature around 4 months of age and females 5 months depending upon the breed of rabbit. Commercially, most breeding occurs by placing the female (doe) in with the male (buck). Artificial Insemination (AI) is not regularly used due to the high labour requirements involved. Females gestate for around 1 month and can produce 4 to 6 litters each year which consist of about 4 to 7 young (kits). Naturally, rabbits would give birth in nests which they have lined with fur plucked from their chests. Commercially, nursing mothers should be provided with a nesting box which should be large enough for the doe to get in and out of to feed her young without injuring them (5). The nest boxes used in farms do not allow nest site protection in the same way as in nature. This, alongside the confined space causes the doe to visit the nest more than the one time each day she would naturally to feed her kits. These repeated visits to the nest therefore increase the risk of the kits being stood on and crushed by the doe (2).

The natural weaning of kits is between 6 to 8 weeks, in commercial units however young are removed from their mothers at 4 weeks old. The normal profitable breeding life of does is



around 3 years of age and rabbits can breed all year round (4). Does are usually re-mated when their young are 3 weeks old, however some farmers re-mate when kits are 2 weeks old allowing them to produce a greater number of litters (7 to 8) per annum.

Farms usually feed rabbits on pellets made up of cereal, grass and high protein, such as fishmeal/soya bean meal, with a mineral and vitamin supplement (4). Farmers are required to provide an environment for rabbits which avoids heat stress and draughts, whilst allowing adequate ventilation with sufficient fresh air so as to prevent the accumulation of gases (such as ammonia) and dust (5). Their environment should be well lit utilizing natural light (lighting is used to control sexual activity) and all rabbits should be able to be clearly seen during hours of daylight. There should also be a period of darkness in each 24 hour cycle (5). Accommodation should be designed and maintained so as to avoid injury or distress to the rabbits.

Most rabbits on commercial farms are kept in mesh cages with automatic food and water feeders, the cages are stacked in 2 or 3 tiers to utilise building space. The floor area of these cages must be large enough to allow rabbits to lie down comfortably, move around and eat and drink without any difficulty. The height should be enough to allow the rabbits to sit upright on all four feet without having their ears touching the top of the hutch or cage (5, 6).

Recommended space allowances for farmed rabbits (5)

SYSTEM	MINIMUM FLOOR SPACE
In cages	
Doe and litter to 5 weeks of age	0.56 m ² total area
Doe and litter to 8 weeks of age	0.74 m ² total area
Rabbits 5 to 12 weeks of age	0.07 m ² per rabbit
Rabbits 12 weeks and over (other than those used for breeding) (multiple occupation cages)	0.18 m ² per rabbit
Adult does and bucks for breeding	0.56 m ² per rabbit
In hutches	
Doe and litter to 5 weeks of age	0.75 m ² total area
Doe and litter to 8 weeks of age	0.93 m ² total area
Rabbits 5 to 12 weeks of age	0.009 m ² per rabbit
Adults does and bucks for breeding	0.75 m ² per rabbit

The most common method of identification of farmed rabbits is to tattoo an individual number in the ear. Marking should only be carried out by competent operators and care should be taken to avoid unnecessary pain or distress to the rabbits (5). Stockpersons are required to periodically shorten the toenails of adult rabbits to avoid overgrown nails catching on cage floors. As rabbits' teeth grow constantly, if they are unable to wear them down, their incisors (front teeth) become overgrown. This can seriously interfere with feeding and drinking and



cause damage to their lips/mouth. Where tooth-trimming is necessary it should be performed by a veterinary surgeon or trained operator (5). The clipping of front teeth is no longer recommended as it places extreme forces on the tooth which compresses the sensitive pulp further up the tooth and sending a shock wave through the skull. Alongside causing pain, it can also shatter the tooth roots leading to infection (7).

Wool Production

Farmers keep rabbits primarily for their meat due to the low value of their skins, making pelt production alone uneconomic (4). There are only a small number of wool producers in the UK as Angora rabbit management is a labour intensive industry. Farmers need to cage animals individually to avoid damage to their wool and the does are not deemed very productive, producing only an average of 24 young per year. The average wool yield of English Angora is 200-400 grams/year. The normal practice for harvesting the wool is shearing, this happens four times a year and provides a fibre of 5-6 cm. The largest angora fibre producer is China. (4, 3).

Disease

Rabbits can suffer from a large range of welfare problems and disease, these include fatal viruses, snuffles and sore hocks from sitting on wire mesh cage floors.

Myxomatosis

This serious viral disease affects only rabbits and is caused by the myxoma virus. The virus is spread mainly by biting insects but can be passed on directly to other rabbits which are in very close proximity. The first clinical sign is conjunctivitis ("red eye") with a runny discharge alongside swollen lips, nose, ears and eyes/eyelids causing blindness. The rabbit may appear listless with a loss of appetite and developing a high fever. It can take up to a fortnight for an infected rabbit to die and as treatment doesn't always work euthanasia is usually recommended. This disease is present in the UK and throughout Europe and Australia. There is a vaccine to protect against myxomatosis and meat producers should seek veterinary advice on its use. (4, 5, 7)

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)

This virus, caused by calicivirus, affects only rabbits and was first reported in the UK in 1992. The disease appears mostly in adults but may affect rabbits over 8 weeks of age. The clinical symptoms are depression, loss of appetite, respiratory distress, lack of coordination, a blood-stained mucus discharge and death occurring within one to two days. The virus is spread through a number of means, such as by direct contact with food (e.g. hay) or water contaminated by infected wild rabbits, bird droppings or direct contact from another rabbit. There is a vaccine to protect against VHD and meat producers should seek veterinary advice on its use. (4, 7).

Coccidiosis

This is a protozoal parasitic infection from the intestinal tract of animals. The species of coccidia found in rabbits are species specific and should not infect humans. In young rabbits this causes diarrhoea and sudden death. (7, 4).

Hyperthermia

Naturally when it is warm/hot, rabbits would move into their burrow to keep cool. However, this is not possible in rabbit farms making them more susceptible. The stockperson(s) should keep a close watch for any signs of heat stress in the rabbits (2).



Transport & Slaughter

Rabbits are usually transported in batches of 10 and they should not be confined for more than 8 hours due to not having any access to food and water. Naturally, rabbits can live up to around 9 years of age. Depending upon the size of the breed, rabbits are slaughtered for their meat from around 3 to 4 months of age. Those used for breeding are culled at 3 years of age as their ability to produce offspring deteriorates. In 2008, 3,685,238 farmed rabbits and game birds were slaughtered, the figures for these are combined under the charging regulations and are not collected separately (3,188,769 were slaughtered in 2007)(1).

Rabbits may be killed by dislocation of the neck or administering a heavy blow to the back of their head followed by decapitation of the animal. Operators should ensure that the blow kills the rabbit outright and not just stun it. Rabbits may also be killed by electrical stunning after which their throat is cut and the animal dies by bleeding to death (4). Rabbits are usually stunned by applying an electric current to their heads via a wall mounted 'V' shaped electrode. From studies carried out by Anil *et al* (8, 9), they found that for electrical stunning in rabbits to be effective a minimum voltage of 100 volts must be applied to provide instantaneous stunning of the animal. Stunning should provide a long enough period of insensibility for operators to 'stick' (cutting the throat) the animal in good time before they regain consciousness.

References & Useful Links

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Further Information - Any questions regarding this information sheet please contact Gilly Prime - Information and Research Officer gilly@vegsoc.org