

COMMERCIAL RABBIT PRODUCTION

Current situation

Commercial rabbit production takes place in at least 14 EU member states, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary. The largest producers are Italy, France and Spain⁴⁶. The EU is responsible for about 55% of world rabbit meat production.

Other European rabbit meat producers include Russia. Rabbit farming is also undertaken in Central America, the USA, parts of Africa, the Republic of Korea and China, which accounts for some 10% of world production.

Although small-scale rabbit breeding has a long tradition in Europe, as a commercial industry rabbit meat production is relatively recent. The most favoured breeds for meat production are the New Zealand Whites and the Californians. The animals are generally kept in wire cages, arranged in three or four tiers or, more commonly in Europe, on flat decks in long buildings. Rabbits reach slaughter weight in about nine weeks, and are usually fed a concentrated pelleted diet of cereals, soya, and lucerne meal. Breeding bucks and does are usually housed in individual cages. Breeding does are re-mated three weeks after the birth of each litter, and can produce about five to eight litters per year.

Rabbit skins are a secondary product of the rabbit meat industry but they are of low value as the animals are generally slaughtered while still immature and before the first moult has taken place. The hair is generally recovered from meat rabbit skins and used in felt making. Where skins are a product in their own right, they may be tanned and used for garments, trims, linings and gloves. Much of the processing is done in Asian countries with low labour costs. The dressed skins are later re-exported back to Europe. The Rex, Satin and Normal fur breeds are reared mainly for their pelts.

The wool of Angora rabbits is used in textiles. It has been much valued by the fashion industry in Italy, France and Japan because of its lightness and softness. European angora producers include Belgium, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom, although production is mostly small-scale for hand knitting in these countries. France and Hungary are the only commercial producers in Europe, accounting for 200 tonnes and 180 tonnes of wool a year respectively.

There are many welfare concerns over the conditions in which farmed rabbits are reared.

Once weaned at four weeks, rabbits are often transferred to colony cages holding groups of five to ten animals, with about 450 cm² to 700 cm² floor space allowed per rabbit. This is insufficient space for rabbits to properly exercise, move normally and adopt normal postures (for example, take sequences of hopping steps, jump, run and rear up on the hind legs with ears fully erect). The lack of exercise and normal movement can result in vertebrae and leg problems, particularly in breeding rabbits.

⁴⁶/Source : <http://faostat.fao.org>

It is most common for floors to be entirely wire mesh, which can cause sore hocks and discomfort.

Bare wire cages provide little opportunity for rabbits to express normal behaviours such as digging, hiding, investigation and jumping onto raised areas. Social behaviours such as grooming, play and avoidance of other rabbits are also severely restricted. Breeding does that are kept individually have no opportunity for social contact with other rabbits and may not be able to carry out normal absentee mothering behaviours such as nest covering and avoidance of the kits (infant rabbits).

If fed only a pelleted diet, there is a lack of dietary enrichment as rabbits have no opportunity to forage normally and manipulate long, fibrous food such as hay, and no opportunity to gnaw on hard, edible objects.

Common problems include digestive and respiratory diseases. Much higher mortality rates than for most other types of farmed animal have been reported for farmed rabbits.

Angora rabbits are often kept in individual cages and the harvesting of the wool by shearing or plucking can cause welfare issues.

Legislation

Council of Europe

The Standing Committee of the *European Convention for the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes* began discussion on drafting a recommendation concerning rabbits in 1998 but it has not yet been adopted. The 18th revision of those draft recommendations took place in December and the 19th revision was to be discussed in February 2010. However, due to budgetary problems these activities have been frozen until further notice.

European Union

There is currently no Community legislation laying down specific welfare standards for commercial rabbit production. However, the general welfare principles of *Council Directive 98/58/EC of 20 July 1998 concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes* apply to rabbits, as to any other farmed animal. The transport of rabbits is covered by *Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 of 22 December 2004 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations*. Some additional provisions for rabbits are made under Chapter V of Annex I to the Regulation. Rabbits are also included within the provisions of *Council Directive 93/119/EC of 22 December 1993 on the protection of animals at the time of slaughter or killing*.

Action needed

- The Standing Committee of the *European Convention on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes* should adopt its recommendation on rabbits as soon as possible and this should serve as a basis for EU and national legislation.
- Further research is needed into commercially viable, hygienic, enriched group-pen systems that allow female and young rabbits to be kept in harmonious social groups, as well improved handling during transport and slaughter, to ensure good welfare.