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Rabbit Production in Florida¹

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Introduction

Rabbits are an ideal small stock project for urban or small farms. Rabbits are quiet, clean and relatively odorless. Raising rabbits can be anything from an interesting and profitable hobby to a full-time living. Today, many people are investigating the possibilities of rabbit production, and those who have studied the subject find its present stage of development worthy of their consideration and investment.

A great number of rabbits are raised each year for pleasure, show, meat, fur, and research purposes. Domestic rabbit meat is a specialty item and is finding acceptance by consumers wherever methods of merchandizing are available. Commercial rabbit production can be designed as a part time endeavor to provide extra income, or expanded into a full-time occupation. Rabbit meat can be prepared and served in many ways. The all white meat of the domestic rabbit can be found in supermarkets packaged as 2 to 2.5 pound fryers or broilers, and the price of rabbit meat is competitive with beef. On a comparable basis, rabbit meat has less cholesterol, fewer calories, and a lower percentage of fat than beef, pork, chicken or lamb, and has a greater protein content (Table 1).

For individuals with digestive problems or those unable to consume red meat, rabbit is frequently recommended by doctors due to its ease of digestion. Rabbits can produce up to ten times their own weight in

edible meat in a year's time and are susceptible to few disease conditions, if good sanitation is practiced.

Table 1. Nutritional Value

	%	%	%	%
Animal	Protein	Fat	Moisture	Cal./lb
Rabbit	20.8	10.2	67.9	795
Chicken	20.0	11.0	67.6	810
Veal	19.1	12.0	68.0	840
Beef	16.3	28.0	55.0	1440
Pork	11.9	45.0	42.0	2050
Lamb	15.7	27.7	55.8	1420

Another significant use of rabbits is the scientific field in medical and pharmaceutical laboratories. Here, a rabbit producer must establish credibility with each laboratory and know what the needs are so that orders can be filled.

Key factors involved in rabbit production are:

- 1) Selection of breeding stock; 2) Housing; 3) Equipment; 4) Feed; 5) Record keeping.

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Selection of Breeding Stock

Select the breed of rabbit which suits the purpose of your production. A decision must be made early in the business as for what use or market the producer is raising rabbits. This paper will focus on the production of rabbits for meat. Giant breeds, while sometimes used for meat, have a feed/meat conversion ratio which is less profitable than medium breeds. Most giant breeds mature at 14 to 16 pounds. Small breeds mature at 3 to 4 pounds and are used primarily for pets, shows and hobbyists. The medium breeds are considered dual purpose and are the most commonly used for meat and research laboratories. The most popular medium breeds are New Zealand Whites and Californians. The commercial rabbit processing plants today desire a white animal and may show a monetary discrimination between white and colored rabbits. New Zealand White and Californian breeds seem to make the best gains, reaching a weight of 4 to 5 pounds in the shortest amount of time. It is also important to choose the right animals within the breed for foundation stock. Reputable breeders, who have stock for sale, will have good records of their rabbitry. It is advisable not to purchase animals without records as they reveal the points which must be considered in establishing a quality operation. Points to consider when purchasing foundation breeding stock:

- Type
- Vitality
- Breeding Efficiency
- Litter Size
- Milk Production
- Rapid Growth
- Longevity
- Disease Resistance
- Feed Conversion
- Mortality

Housing and Equipment

The correct housing and equipment are as necessary as the breeding stock to ensure a successful operation. The housing and environment will affect the health, growth and productivity of each litter. The cost of housing will vary depending upon the type of building desired and the location. Weather extremes should be considered in building construction. Many operations have buildings

which have been converted from other uses to rabbit production. Three major considerations must be given to housing.

Temperature Control

Protection from winter wind and summer sun is essential. Shade trees or artificial shade may be necessary during hot weather. Open sided houses, windowless houses and insulated houses are in use. Housing design depends upon the climate and the amount of environmental control desired. Ventilation fans and lights may be automatically controlled. A temperature range above 40°F and below 80°F is satisfactory. In very hot weather, arrangement for water or mist cooling of the building may be necessary.

Air Exchange

A rabbitry should have eight to ten air changes per hour without drafts. Although rabbits can withstand cold weather, they cannot tolerate direct drafts. Rabbits are most comfortable in temperature conditions where humans are comfortable.

Drainage

A well-drained site is essential. This is especially so where water may be necessary to cool the rabbitry during hot weather. Excess moisture contributes to odor problems, insect problems and disease transmission. Most modern rabbit buildings have concrete floors or concrete walks between the rows. These walks should be wide enough for feed and manure handling equipment.

Cages and Water

Cages should be sanitary, durable and self-cleaning. For this reason, wire cages are recommended and the use of wood should be avoided completely. Commercial rabbit producers use welded wire that is galvanized. Cages should be constructed that are 30 inches wide and 30 or 36 inches long by 18 inches high. Sides, ends and tops of cages can be made of wire which is 1 X 1 inch or 1 X 2 inches wide. Floors should be welded wire of ½ inch or 5/8 inch X 1 inch mesh. The cages should be suspended from the ceiling at a height comfortable for the operator to work. Cages are available commercially or may be constructed by the rabbit producer, and may be hung in rows and back to back in single tiers. Double tiers of rabbit cages are not recommended and require special

consideration for urine and manure disposal. Extra cages should be available for growing rabbits and the isolation of new rabbits brought into the herd.

Fresh clean water should be available at all times. Automatic watering devices with stem valves assure a supply of fresh water, save time and are much more sanitary than water dishes. A filter system may be necessary depending on the water supply. Nest boxes of metal are available which are easily cleaned. Wooden nest boxes can be used; however, sanitation of these boxes requires extra consideration. Ideal nest box size is 12 inches high by 12 inches wide by 18 inches long, with one end cut down to six inches. In warm climates, a nest made entirely from the hair of the doe may be satisfactory. In cooler climates, nesting material such as straw, shavings, or paper may be necessary for warmth for the litter.

Pros and Cons of Rabbit Production

Raising rabbits is not a "get rich quick" business. The rabbit business can be profitable on a small scale or as a full-time operation, provided particular attention is paid to the selection of a good breeding herd and good management is practiced on a daily basis.

Interested individuals should realize that daily care is required and a capital investment is necessary for the proper facility. An important point, which many producers may take for granted, is to establish a suitable market prior to starting in different areas of the country. Another consideration is particular zoning laws which may differ in each community. There is ample information available for those interested in rabbit production.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND SUPPLIES:

1. American Rabbit Breeders Assn.
1925 S. Main Street
Bloomington, IL 61701
2. Bass Equipment
Box 352
Morrett, MO 65708
3. Favorite Manufacturing Co.
R.D. 1, Box 176
New Holland, PA 17557
4. Harrisville Equipment Co.
214 N. Main
Harrisville, PA 16038
5. Jones Manufacturing Company
P.O. Box 123
Ramona, CA 92065
6. Rabbit Hill
N 5588 Highway 84
Fredonia, WI 53021
7. Loyl Stromberg
Stromberg's Pets Unlimited
50 Lakes Route
Pine River, MCN 56474