



Good practice factsheet: outdoor rearing of rabbits



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Introduction

This factsheet is an example of a possible way of breeding and rearing rabbits outdoor. The main advantages for rabbit welfare will be described as well as the main issues that might appear, particularly related to health. The farm used as example is a small scale farm producing 300 rabbits a year in organic production, but bigger units can be developed following the same principle. This outdoor farm had been running for four years at the time of the visit.



Breeding

In this specific example, the farm was including 30 females of a high prolificity and fast-growing industrial genotype from a previous indoor barn breeding. Progressively, the farmer was introducing local and slower growing genotypes.

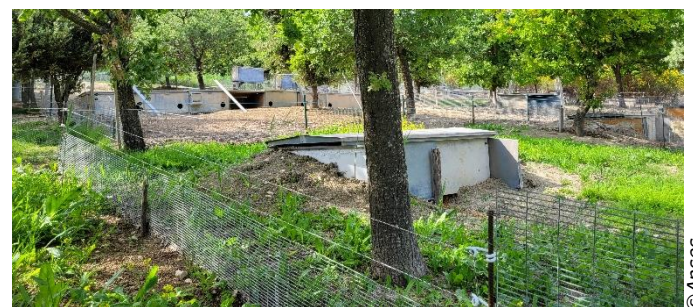
On average five bucks are used for 25 to 30 does. During summer a male is introduced in each outdoor enclosure of three females and stays several days. The rest of the time, males are housed in single outdoor enclosures, separated by a fence, with visual contact. Then, just after weaning of her litter, each doe is placed for 24h maximum in a male pen. Pregnancy diagnostic is done at day 12 by palpation. Each doe has three to five litters a year. On average, each female delivers 8 kits and 5 are weaned. Does are usually kept until approx. 4-year-old but may occasionally continue reproduction at an older age.



Housing

Each female is placed after her weaning in an outdoor enclosure, using the following approach and design to avoid negative interaction between does and improve animal welfare:

- three females are placed and will stay permanently together as a group in an outdoor enclosure of 150 m² (see Figure 1),
- the enclosure is furnished with: i) collective shelter with straw bedding (in this specific case of 1m x 2,1 m, see Figure 2); ii) three individual smaller nests, either under the ground or on the ground (see Figure 3),
- the enclosure should contain trees, grass, bushes or scrub and with some slope to drain rainwater,
- the fence should be approx. 60 cm high. Electrical wire is installed at the bottom of the fence (to avoid rabbits digging under the fence and at the top to avoid escape of rabbits and predators to enter (see Figure 1).



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Figure 1: enclosure of 150 m² with three does.



Feeding

Rabbits fed on the vegetation in the outdoor enclosure. In this specific example, they are also fed with different subproducts to improve feed variety and make the production more sustainable. Rabbits are fed with wheat bran (from flour production) and sprouted barley (from brewery). Alfalfa is also distributed daily and tree branches twice a week. Water is acidified and distributed through automatic nipple drinkers.

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Figure 2: the three does in the collective nest.



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Figure 3: two individual nests with the top opened.

Management

Rabbits are weaned between 40 and 50 days, when weighting approximately 1 kg. They are then placed in rearing enclosures in groups of thirty (figure 4).



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Figure 4: groups of fattening rabbits separated by a wire fence.

For renewal of the breeding stock, young females are selected at weaning on the basis of physical and behavioural (toward the farmer and the kits) characteristics.

Does and bucks are tattooed but the fact that does are kept in groups of three makes it very easy to recognize individuals.

All breeding information is registered per doe to follow the production cycle.

Rabbits are caught by hand or with a butterfly net.

Meat rabbits are slaughtered on farm at approximately 130 days, at a live weight of 2.7 kg.

Health

In this specific example, all rabbits were vaccinated against viral hemorrhagic disease, and water was acidified with cider vinegar (2%) one week per month. Essential oils were used against skin affections.

Rotations between enclosures are important to guarantee that enclosures stay empty one cycle between each use (in the present example, half of the enclosures were empty at any time).

Pros and cons



All rabbits are housed in outdoor enclosures and are able to walk, run, jump and dig.

All rabbits have different types of feed and gnawing material at all times.

Does live in small groups with no significant agonistic interaction.



There is a risk of predation.

Some rabbits escape the enclosure.



Mortality rate of kits can be up to 25% due to diseases or accident in the first weeks.

Recommendations:

To guarantee animal welfare and health, this type of production system requires:

- Implementation of biosecurity (medical and sanitary).
- Good fencing and predator regulation.
- Presence of collective nest and individual nest with straw bedding and protected from adverse climatic events (wind, rain, flooding, etc.).
- Keeping does in small and stable groups from weaning and onwards.
- Provision of diverse sources of feed and gnawing material at all times.
- Sufficiently large enclosures to ensure continuous vegetation cover and for rabbits to be able to avoid negative interactions (e.g., 150 m² for 3 does and 3 litters up to weaning).



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