

Guidelines for Entry into Meat Rabbit Production

UNP-0080

Rabbit Production 101

Prior to becoming a rabbit producer, it's important to learn some basic guidelines about getting started in the business. An informed producer is more likely to be a successful producer.

Rabbit production has three basic requirements: rabbits, cages, and a building. If you already have a farm and buildings, you can easily start to produce 20 does (female rabbits) with 2 bucks (male rabbits) and 40 individual cages for less than \$1,000. This also includes the purchase of feeders, a water supply, feed, and a few other inexpensive items. Soon, you may wonder why the number of cages is doubling. Don't forget that rabbits do multiply, and need daily care.

Breeds

Rabbits are generally classified according to size, weight, and type of pelt. Small rabbits weigh 2 to 5 pounds at maturity; medium breeds weigh 5 to 8 pounds; and large breeds weigh an average of 8 to 12 pounds. New Zealand and Californian rabbits are the most popular breeds for meat production. While other breeds are used, the New Zealand and Californian breeds have a higher meat-to-bone ratio. They are also very popular because their fur is mostly

white, which processors generally prefer as dark hair shows up on pink meat. A suggested stocking rate of 1 buck per 10-15 does should work for novice producers. Cross-breeding Californian and New Zealand breeds will result in hybrid vigor, a more "hearty" rabbit that tends to be healthier and grows out quicker. Remember to keep your source of full-blood breeding stock. Each production and management plan will vary depending on individual goals.



Californian Rabbit



Young New Zealand Rabbit

Cages

Cages are essential and options vary depending on farm management needs. Each rabbit must be kept in a separate cage. Rabbits are territorial and living in crowded conditions may cause them to become aggressive with each other. Cages are sold individually or in sets. The number of cages per set varies from 3 to 6. Cages need to be off the ground, set on frames or saw horses, or hung from the ceiling. Hanging from the ceiling allows easy access to clean underneath the cages.

Cage sizes vary depending on your preference and size of the rabbits. A medium-size cage per rabbit should be 24 x 30 inches. A larger cage allows for a nesting box and enough space for a doe and her litter. The nesting box is placed in a cage long enough to allow a doe to kindle (give birth) and provide housing for the young rabbits until they are weaning age. Materials are available for you to build your own cages, or you can buy them from other rabbit producers who build cages to sell.

Housing

A simple pole barn can provide adequate housing for rabbit production. A semi-enclosed barn is better. However, an abandoned poultry barn or hog parlor is also good, or a small shed will suffice during the beginning stages of rabbit production. A 30X30 foot barn is a good size to produce fewer than 50 does and bucks. Having a pre-existing building on your land will help minimize fixed costs and enhance profitability of your operation.

Ventilation is also an important consideration. Utilization of electricity and fans may be necessary depending on the local climate. During the winter, a pole barn may need to be enclosed with tarps to provide protection from wind and cold temperatures. Don't forget that water freezes and young rabbits can too. Ventilation is important in reducing the incidence of disease and other health-related problems. A combination of urine, feces, and water on the ground can facilitate various diseases to become problems. The strong odor of urine can irritate the esophagus and lung tissue of rabbits and humans. Spreading hydrated lime or vinegar

under the cages will help neutralize urine and its odor.

Accessories

Accessories needed for rabbit production include feeders, water dispensers, resting mats, and kindling boxes. You will also need time. Feeders are often made of perforated metal, come in several sizes, and hang on the outside of the cage. Prices depend on size and vary from \$4 to \$8. Watering equipment comes in two forms: water bottles that hang on the side of a cage and gravity feed water lines that are less labor intensive. The water bottles with hangers cost about \$6 each and must be filled frequently. A gravity feed watering system is affordable and easy to set up. All it requires is a water source, a 5-gallon bucket, water lines (similar to those used in the poultry industry), and a drip water spout that attaches to the side of the rabbit cage. You can buy all of these accessories at a farmers cooperative or feed store.

Feed

Rabbit chow is available at your local farmers cooperative or at most feed stores.

A 50-pound bag of rabbit feed costs about \$8. Using feed specially formulated for rabbits is recommended. Supplemental feed can include hay, steam-rolled oats and barley, and black oil sunflower seed. Rabbits will even eat turnips and other greens, but be careful to feed only small amounts of produce as treats. Focus on using rabbit chow. The feed used should provide a protein level of 16 to 18 percent.

Conclusion

As you work your way into the rabbit industry, remember that learning is an ongoing process. Progress will come as you learn from other producers, Extension specialists, or from personal experience. The information in this publication can help you get started. To be a successful producer you should join a rabbit registry or a rabbit producer group and seek credible information from sources such as your local Extension office, the Internet, a local bookstore, or library. A good book to start with is *Small-Scale Commercial Rabbit Production* by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System or *Rabbit Production* (8th ed.) by James McNitt.



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Auburn Universities

UNP-0080

Robert Spencer, *Urban Regional Extension Specialist*, Alabama A&M University

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Published by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University), an equal opportunity educator and employer.

Revised November 2011; UNP-0080

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