

Reports and Comments

Farmed rabbit welfare

Rabbit is an increasingly popular meat and approximately 1.2 billion rabbits are raised and slaughtered around the world each year to supply a growing market. The European Union (EU) is the second largest producer of rabbit meat (following China), and Spain, France and Italy provide 83% of EU production.

As in other farming systems, rabbits have predominantly been genetically selected for production traits, such as increased growth rate and muscle mass in rearing rabbits, and increased litter size and milk production in breeding females. All animals raised for farming purposes within the EU are given a level of protection through Council Directive 98/58/EC, and some farmed animals are afforded further protection via secondary legislation, such as Council Directive 2008/119/EC which lays down minimum standards for the protection of calves. However, there is no such species-specific legislation for farmed rabbits and the last Scientific Opinion to be published on the health and welfare of rabbits kept for meat production was in 2005.

Consequently, the AGRI committee of the European Parliament requested that the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) update the previous 2005 Opinion on the health and welfare of farmed rabbits (including organic systems), and to also consider the welfare of farmed rabbits at slaughter (which is considered in the following report in this section).

The EFSA specifically looked into the welfare of rabbits bred and reared for meat (breeding does, kits and growing rabbits) and did not consider the welfare of rabbits kept as pets, for research purposes or other purposes, such as fur farming. The Opinion gives a general background of the life production cycle of meat rabbits, and explains the different production systems (conventional cages, structurally enriched cages, elevated pens, floor pens, outdoor/partially outdoor systems and organic systems). The majority (66%) of the 180 million rabbits farmed annually in the EU are raised in conventional caged systems varying in farm size from a few hundred reproducing does, to thousands.

The Opinion goes on to explain how welfare issues in farmed rabbits were identified and assessed. A Working Group (formed by the EFSA and including experts on different aspects of rabbit welfare), recognised the following behavioural and health conditions as welfare consequences: prolonged hunger; prolonged thirst; pododermatitis; locomotory disorders; skin lesions and wounds; respiratory disorders; gastroenteric disorders; reproductive disorders; other skin disorders; thermal stress (heat and cold); mastitis; neonatal disorders (including starvation/mis-mothering and cannibalism/exposure complex); restriction of movement; resting problems; inability to express maternal behaviour; inability to express positive social interactions; inability to express gnawing behaviour; occurrence of abnormal behaviours; fear; metabolic disorders; and pain.

A two-step expert knowledge elicitation process was then used to evaluate the occurrence, duration and severity of each welfare consequence for each housing condition. An overall welfare assessment score was then calculated. Additionally, a scientific literature review was carried out to investigate the hazards associated with each welfare consequence and the identified hazards grouped into seven categories: housing; ambient conditions; genetics; nutrition and feeding; management and biosecurity; management and reproduction; and other.

Overall, the EFSA concluded that the welfare of reproducing does was lower in conventional caged systems, but that there was little difference between the other five housing systems. Similarly, the welfare of growing rabbits was also lowest when housed in conventional cages, although for growing rabbits there was a clearer welfare benefit for rabbits housed in elevated pens. Elevated pens also ranked highest for kit welfare. Organic systems were found to vary greatly, which led to a range in welfare scores, however, in general, the welfare of rabbits in organic systems was considered to be good.

The Opinion closes with a list of general recommendations to be considered by the rabbit industry as a whole, primarily that: "A systematic and large-scale data collection exercise should be carried out to provide objective information on rabbit welfare in different housing and management systems in the EU". It is also recommended that further, basic research is carried out to better understand the behavioural needs of rabbits and how these needs may be catered for in farming systems to facilitate good rabbit welfare.

Specific recommendations for each housing system are then provided, for example, it is recommended that cage size be increased and stocking density reduced to alleviate movement restriction and improve resting and social behaviours of rabbits housed in conventional cages. In organic systems it is recommended that: "Fear in growing rabbits can be minimised by protections against potential predators (dogs, foxes, birds of prey, etc), such as a robust electrified fence, a net top protection against birds of prey, and setting up hiding places in paddocks".

Scientific Opinion on the Health and Welfare of Rabbits Farmed in Different Production Systems (2020). A4, 96 pages. EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (Saxmose Nielsen S, Alvarez J, Bicout DJ, Calistri P, Depner K, Drewe JA, Garin-Bastuji B, Gonzales Rojas JL, Gortazar-Schmidt C, Michel V, Miranda Chueca MA, Roberts HC, Sihyonen LH, Spooler H, Stahl K, Velarde Calvo A, Viltrop A, Buijs S, Edwards S, Candiani D, Mosbach-Schulz O, Van der Stede Y and Winckler C). EFSA Journal 2020, 18(1): 5944. Open access paper, available online at: <https://doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2020.5944> ISSN:1831-4732.

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