



Model Rabbit Classification

Livestock, Companion Animal, Or What?



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RABBIT EDUCATION SOCIETY
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Multi-purpose animal Classification definition: Rabbits used or intended for use as food or fiber, or used or intended for use for improving animal nutrition, breeding, breeding for show, the preservation of bloodlines or for commercial purpose, management, or production efficiency, or for improving the quality of food or fiber. Multi-purpose classification shall exclude rabbits used solely as a household pet. Rabbits used solely as a household pet are classified as a companion animal.

Rabbit Classification: Rabbits cannot be defined as either just livestock or just companion animal as they are unique and multi-purpose with any single rabbit breeder utilizing their herd for more than one purpose. Purpose or uses for rabbits include meat (human and other animal), fur production, wool production, laboratory use, pets, & show. Therefore rabbits should have their own unique classification as a **multi-purpose animal**. Zoning laws and any other legislation applied to rabbits need to address this unique and special characteristic which is not found in other species. If their multi-purpose utilization is not recognized it places an undue hardship on the many rabbit owners in the United States.

The domestic rabbit is a truly “multi-purpose” animal and as such any single breeder’s use may overlap into several very different areas. For example many show breeders are breeding to improve their herd as per a show standard. Those not needed in the breeding program may be sold as pets or breeding/show stock, or used by the breeder for (or sold to others for) consumption by humans or other animals.

Meanwhile you also need to recognize those who own rabbits solely as a pet or companion animal. These rabbits may or not be spayed/neutered, may live inside the household and considered a “family member” and may not end up being used as food or even bred.

How any government entity classifies the domestic rabbit affects many people, breeders, pet owners, commercial producers, pet stores, and others. Most of the time legislators are not aware of the effect of how they classify rabbits. Rabbits are unlike dogs, cats, or other types of animals because their use often overlaps as show animal, food, and pets. You usually don’t see this type of cross over into so many varied purposes with other species.

Rabbit Statistics:

Over 20,000 members of the American Rabbit Breeders Assoc. (1/31/12 ARBA member report)
8.5 million raised for food in the US (USDA)
800 million used for food worldwide 1998 (USDA)
300,000 rabbits were used for research in 735 facilities during 1999 (USDA)
2 million used for fur worldwide
*136 USDA inspected dealers or breeders with approximately 84,000 rabbits (commercial segment of the rabbit industry)
*2,500 rabbits owned by 351 USDA licensed exhibitors
3.2 million kept as pets as per AVMA 2012 estimate

*Hobby show rabbit breeders are not required to be licensed by the USDA unless they meet certain criteria such as selling over \$500 per year in pet rabbits to pet stores or dealers, or sight unseen pet sales, the above noted as USDA license holders would be considered commercial pet breeders or animal exhibitors with USDA. According to the USDA only about 1 in 10 people who raise rabbits are ARBA members (ARBA had about 35,000 members according to the USDA report 2002).

“The value of the rabbit industry in the US is estimated at \$25 million a year. This includes a \$15 million value for rabbits raised for research purposes and \$10 million a year from the sale of rabbit meat and pelts. These estimates do not include rabbits which are pets or show rabbits.”

USDA http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/ceah/cei/IW_2000_files/rabbitcal.htm

The USDA classifies rabbits as livestock when used for food or fiber. The USDA through the Retail Pet Store Regulation rules recognizes the unique position show rabbit breeders hold aka preservation of bloodlines:

RABBITS, FARM ANIMALS, AND COLDBLOODED SPECIES

Q. How does the final rule affect rabbit breeders who raise rabbits for food, fur, or preservation of bloodlines?

A. The final rule does not change our regulation of breeders who sell rabbits or other animals for use as food or fiber (including fur). Anyone selling animals only for food or fiber is exempt under the AWA. People selling rabbits at retail for breeding purposes (such as preservation of bloodlines) are not regulated. (USDA/APHIS, 2013)

USDA Rabbit Classification:

AWA regulations other farm animals, such as, but not limited to, livestock or poultry used or intended for use as food or fiber, or livestock or poultry used or intended for use for improving animal nutrition, breeding, management, or production efficiency, or for improving the quality of food or fiber.

Farm animal means any domestic species of cattle, sheep, swine, goats, llamas, or horses, which are normally and have historically, been kept and raised on farms in the United States, and used or intended for use as food or fiber, or for improving animal nutrition, breeding, management, or production efficiency, or for improving the quality of food or fiber. This term also includes animals such as rabbits, mink, and chinchilla, when they are used solely for purposes of meat or fur, and animals such as horses and llamas when used solely as work and pack animals

Pet animal means any animal that has commonly been kept as a pet in family households in the United States, such as dogs, cats, guinea pigs, rabbits, and hamsters. This term excludes exotic animals and wild animals (Animal Welfare Act)

The livestock classification is helpful to those breeding commercially for food or fiber use (assistance to farmers, etc). It negatively affects show breeders, 4-Hers, and pet owners if zoning law prohibits or restricts livestock on their property. A livestock classification also protects those raising rabbits for meat as well as other uses from being prohibited from using rabbits for food or accused of animal cruelty for raising or utilizing rabbits as food.

Rabbits are a quick-breeding source of low-fat, high-protein meat and have long been enjoyed as a food by people around the world. A fine-grained white meat, it can be substituted for chicken in many recipes and is a diet staple in both France and Italy.

Until the increase in beef consumption in the 1960s, rabbit was also popular in the United States. Today, the interest in lower fat diets and healthy eating combined with an ongoing

pursuit by chefs and foodies of novel and locally produced foods has led to a domestic resurgence in the use of rabbits for meat. November 2013 (Agricultural Marketing Research Center, n.d.)

A companion animal classification would in some cases make raising rabbits for food an act of animal cruelty. It all depends on how the existing laws are worded as well as how other laws interact and are interpreted. This is inappropriate because rabbits have always been a traditional and legitimate source of meat for both humans and other animals. Rabbit meat has many health benefits. Since it is inexpensive to raise rabbits this also makes an excellent source of food for anyone especially low income Americans. Also an important aspect of using rabbits as meat is it is a natural population control. One only need to look at what happened to the US horse population when their use for meat was banned.

Below are definitions used in the VA legislature. Note that rabbits are included in both livestock and companion animal definitions. Livestock says rabbits used for food or fiber however under farming activity they note breeding and exhibition. So what exactly is a show rabbit or herd of show rabbits being raised and bred in order to improve and preserve a bloodline? It would be beneficial for show rabbit breeders to have their own unique classification to clearly define what they do.

"Companion animal" means any domestic or feral dog, domestic or feral cat, nonhuman primate, guinea pig, hamster, rabbit not raised for human food or fiber, exotic or native animal, reptile, exotic or native bird, or any feral animal or any animal under the care, custody, or ownership of a person or any animal that is bought, sold, traded, or bartered by any person. Agricultural animals, game species, or any animals regulated under federal law as research animals shall not be considered companion animals for the purposes of this chapter.

"Livestock"; includes all domestic or domesticated: bovine animals; equine animals; ovine animals; porcine animals; cervidae animals; caprae animals; animals of the genus Lama; ratites; fish or shellfish in aquaculture facilities, as defined in § 3.2-2600; enclosed domesticated rabbits or hares raised for human food or fiber; or any other individual animal specifically raised for food or fiber, except companion animals.

"Farming activity" means, consistent with standard animal husbandry practices, the raising, management, and use of agricultural animals to provide food, fiber, or transportation and the breeding, exhibition, lawful recreational use, marketing, transportation, and slaughter of agricultural animals pursuant to such purposes. (William M. Stanley, 2015)

An example of the problems that arise when rabbits are not classified in their own unique category can be found in New York. Under NYS Agriculture and Marketing law, article 26 section 350 animals are either "Farm" or "companion animal":

"Farm animal", as used in this article, means any ungulate, poultry, species of cattle, sheep, swine, goats, llamas, horses or fur-bearing animals, as defined in section 11-1907 of the environmental conservation law, which are raised for commercial or subsistence purposes. Fur-bearing animal shall not include dogs or cats.

"Companion animal" or "pet" means any dog or cat, and shall also mean any other domesticated animal normally maintained in or near the household of the owner or person who cares for such other domesticated animal. "Pet" or "companion animal" shall not include a "farm animal" as defined in this section.

In 2012 a bill was introduced that eventually passed into law that would ban the tattooing of "companion animals" in NYS (see below). The issue with rabbits was that because of how NYS defines pet and livestock the way they do all rabbits could be interpreted as "companion animal" and subject to a ban on tattooing. However it is accepted husbandry practice to tattoo rabbits in order to identify them. It is also required to have a rabbit tattooed if it is entered in a rabbit show. At one point the wording was changed to allow tattooing for identification but only if done by a veterinarian. This would have placed a financial burden on the many rabbit breeders and both adult and youth if it wasn't corrected. I was contacted by the bill's sponsor regarding the issues with non-pet rabbits:

"I would like to discuss how A.739 (2013 #) affects individuals who breed or show rabbits or covies. Is the issue that 4H or other regulatory bodies mandate that these animals be tattooed or tagged in order to be put in their shows? I'm trying to understand the necessity of the tattooing or otherwise that must take place. With this information, I could reassess the language of the bill. " (Jan 2013)

After explaining what the issues were I received another response:

*New York State Animal Owners
February 15, 2013*

Got an e-mail from the legislator's aide regarding the tattoo ban bill, remember at this point the big problem is the bill says only a vet can tattoo an animal. She said "Thank you so much for the thorough explanation of the issue, Corinne." And will discuss w/ lawmakers exempting rabbits and covies. So we have some positive news. (Post from NYSAO facebook pg)

If rabbits had their own unique classification the bill would not have been a problem for rabbit breeders who raise rabbits for food, fiber, and preservation of bloodlines. Other legislation could be equally problematic if rabbits are listed as only one choice between two categories. The multi-purpose classification would show rabbits kept as household pets belong in "companion animal" however there is recognition for legitimate rabbit breeders raising rabbits for food, fiber, or preservation of bloodlines.

NYS law banning tattooing of companion animals:

* § 353-f. Companion animal piercing and tattooing prohibited. 1. No person shall pierce or cause to have pierced a companion animal unless such piercing provides a medical benefit to the companion animal. Such piercing shall be performed by a licensed veterinarian or under the supervision of a licensed veterinarian. Nothing in this section shall be construed to apply to ear tags on rabbits and covies.

2. No person shall tattoo or cause to have tattooed a companion animal unless such tattoo:

(a) is done in conjunction with a medical procedure for the benefit of the companion animal and to indicate that such medical procedure has been done, provided that such tattoo is not for design purposes; or

(b) is done for the purpose of identification of the companion animal and not for design purposes, and such tattoo includes only such numbers and/or letters allotted by a corporation that, in the regular course of its business, maintains an animal tattoo identification registry.

3. For the purposes of this section, "tattoo" shall mean a mark on the body made with indelible ink or pigments injected beneath the outer layer of the skin.

4. Tattooing done in conjunction with a medical procedure for the benefit of a companion animal that indicates that such medical procedure has been done shall be performed by a licensed veterinarian or under the supervision of a licensed veterinarian.

5. Any person who knowingly violates the provisions of this section shall be guilty of a violation punishable pursuant to the penal law.

* NB Effective April 14, 2015

Legislators must balance all the needs of the community and various rabbit raisers when enacting legislation. Since rabbits do not require much space to raise, nor make noise, and odor can be kept to a minimum, limiting rabbit activities with numbers or by property size is not logical. It also hurts low income families trying to feed themselves, or hobbyists and youth pursuing a healthy responsible activity.

Rabbit breeders will have more animals than what the public thinks dog or cat breeders commonly have. It is not uncommon for a show breeder to raise numerous breeds and have herd sizes of 50-100 or more, or even as few as 10-15 rabbits. Again rabbits require little space to raise, they don't negatively impact the environment, are clean, and odor can be kept to a minimum unlike other traditional farm animals which in large numbers can cause a nuisance. Many breeder's rabbitries are inside their homes in a garage or porch, others use a barn, shed,

or outdoor hutches. Rabbits are a versatile animal and perfect to raise as a hobby or even a small business pursuit.

Commercial meat breeders usually have herds that number several hundred with the primary purpose of producing meat for profit. If a town wants to address zoning issues for large commercial meat producers it is easy enough to do by addressing the primary purpose and not prohibit show breeders, pet breeders, or 4-Hers raising rabbits as a hobby. A hobby breeder is producing rabbits for the primary purpose of showing them at organized rabbit shows and fairs, preservation and improvement of bloodlines, and/or home consumption. For hobby breeders the primary purpose or raising rabbits is not as a for profit business.

To date no entity has enacted a law classifying rabbits as “multi-purpose”. Again legislators need to look at how classifying rabbits as either livestock or multi-purpose will be impacted by existing laws and future legislation. The purpose of creating a new classification category of multi-purpose is to address the overlap uses of rabbits as food, fur, pet, and show animal by any single breeder and to prevent any one activity from being prohibited or incorrectly viewed as “animal cruelty”. Rabbit breeders provide a valuable service to the community, it is unfair to prohibit or severely restrict a harmless activity which produces so many and varied benefits. We also don't want to see pet owners prohibited from owning rabbits.

Rabbit Breeder Classification

Recognition is needed that breeder means very different things to different people. The following is an outline of the different classes of rabbit breeders and what usually defines their activities.

Hobby or Show Breeder: Individual whose primary purpose in breeding rabbits is for exhibition at organized rabbit shows, personal food and fiber use, or to improve an existing breed or create a new breed (improvement and preservation of bloodlines). While showing is the primary purpose of the Hobby breeder one may also use some of the herd and offspring for meat purposes, sale as pets, wool production, breeding/show stock sales to other breeders, or other uses. Herd number can vary widely from a few rabbits to over a hundred rabbits depending on the number of different breeds raised and/or color varieties. 85-90% of breeders breed rabbits as a hobby. (Website) The majority of hobby rabbitries are exempt from USDA/APHIS licensing requirements. The key here is that the show breeder is breeding rabbits not as a business but as a hobby. Even though they may receive compensation for sales of rabbits they are not profit driven nor should they be subjected to regulations for commercial businesses. It is logical that when one breeds rabbits they cannot keep all that are produced and would need to be able to disperse rabbits that do not fit into a breeding program.

Existing Law: Hobby breeder can be a person housing or breeding animals at or adjoining a private residence for the purpose of exhibiting animals at organized shows or for the purpose of improving the breed and an active member of a national, state or local breeder organization. (GA State Animal Care Regulations)

Existing Law: Private residence shall mean a place in which a person lives that belongs to or is leased by the person and/or an immediate member of his or her family. (GA State Animal Care Regulations)

Commercial Breeder: A commercial rabbit breeder may be primarily breeding rabbits to produce food or fiber or they may be a commercial pet rabbit breeder primarily breeding to sell to pet stores or dealers. Herd number can easily start at several hundred in order to have a viable business. The motive in breeding is to run a business and produce a profit. A commercial rabbitry involved in primarily selling to pet stores has an average of 2,000 rabbits (based on numbers from USDA 2002 report). The USDA would regulate commercial pet rabbit breeders. USDA requires rabbit breeders who sell rabbits as pets to third parties, or sight unseen, or for research, or for animal exhibits and grosses over \$500 per year to have a USDA license.

Existing law: Commercial breeder shall mean any person, firm, partnership, corporation, or other association which engages in breeding animals for the purpose of sale or transfer of animals for compensation. **Hobby breeders are excluded from this classification.** (GA State Animal Care Regulations)

Unlicensed Commercial Breeder: Anyone selling rabbits to a pet store and grossing over \$500 are required by law to be licensed and inspected by the USDA/APHIS. Animal rights activists refer to all breeders as “mills” but this is incorrect. Those truly interested in animal welfare characterize a business where large numbers of rabbits are kept in filthy and unhealthy conditions and bred without regard to breed purity, genetic abnormalities, health, or their welfare in great quantities solely for the pet market for profit at ages too young to ensure their survivability as a substandard commercial breeding facility (Rabbit Education Society definition).

"Backyard" Breeder: This term is often used by animal shelter workers and more recently refers to someone raising rabbits in their backyard. The term usually refers to an individual who is not breeding for exhibition at organized rabbit shows or for food/fiber, to improve a breed, or as a food/fiber business. This category includes pet owners who allow accidental litters. The primary purpose in breeding is usually to produce pet rabbits for sale not as a business or just for fun. Beware of those who use it to describe where the breeding takes place, they often mix up terms to confuse people in order to pass legislation restricting or banning all breeding. A backyard breeder is not necessarily an irresponsible breeder and this term should not be used in a negative way. Irresponsible breeding would be defined as keeping animals in substandard facilities and breeding without regard to health issues or genetic problems, and not finding a responsible outlet for the offspring.

Pet Dealer means a person who sells, offers to sell, exchanges, or offers for adoption pets they did not produce but have bought or otherwise obtained for compensation primarily for commercial purposes (GA State Animal Care Regulations). Pet dealers would be mainly involved with supplying pet stores with pet rabbits.

Some animal shelters are now importing animals from other countries or areas because they do not have enough animals to provide for sale to pet owners. These shelters are really no different than a commercial pet store and deserve no special treatment or exemption from laws.

Also many rabbit “rescues” are purchasing rabbits from meat breeders, show breeders, auctions, online ads such as craigslist to resell as pets. There is also import/exporting of shelter

rabbits which should be equated to pet dealership. They use the term “adoption” but if any consideration changes hands in order to obtain a pet rabbit it should be viewed as a sale. And “adoption fee” is still consideration in order to obtain a pet and should be viewed as a business.

In addition the rabbit “rescue” industry often says all rabbit breeders must be regulated and restricted due to the number of pet rabbits in shelters. However if rabbit “rescues” are actually purchasing rabbits from sources other than a registered animal shelter it indicates there is no “overpopulation” of pet rabbits and no logical reason to regulate or restrict rabbit breeders. There already exists much more regulation of rabbit breeding than so called rabbit “rescue”. The USDA does not regulate any shelters or “rescues”. In addition rabbits sold by rabbit “rescues” and shelters do get returned by the owners. Rabbit “rescue” in effect is creating an endless cycle of unwanted pet rabbits and swelling the numbers by purchasing rabbits who were not destined to enter the pet market.

Following are screen shots of just a few examples of “rescue” groups buying rabbits from auctions and meat breeders to resell or as they label it “adopt” as pets.

Mabel & Sugar
Chinchilla Mix & New Zealand • Senior • Female • Large
Great Lakes Rabbit Sanctuary Whittaker, MI

Share: Facebook Twitter Email Print

Sponsor Me **Adopt Me**

ABOUT MABEL & SUGAR
Meet Mabel and Sugar. They were part of a large group of rabbits rescued from an auction. Mabel is the Chinchilla rabbit, and has beautiful silver/grey fur. Mabel has a charming personality and is definitely the more outgoing

GREAT LAKES RABBIT SANCTUARY
PO Box 7
Whittaker, MI 48190
[Contact this Organization](#)

A Facebook page devoted to trolling craigslist ads to purchase non-pet rabbits to resell aka “adopt” into the pet market: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/507859552665695/>

*Welcome new members.
Please remember this is a PUBLIC PAGE, when posting Craigslist Free Rabbits or Breeder Rescues. Please do not send nasty emails or bash the owners here, we have lost contact and rabbits due to this issue and it is not productive in saving the rabbits.
Feel free to network and post all Rabbits in Danger here. Feral rabbits, Shelter rabbits on death row, Free Rabbits in danger of being abused, used as snake food, bait, or PTS*

From “Saveabunny” rabbit “rescue” purchase of a meat rabbit breeder’s herd to sell into the pet market:

February 15 - 29 Rabbits Rescued from a Meat Rabbit Breeder in Sacramento On Valentine’s weekend, 29 rabbits were rescued from a meat rabbit breeder from Sacramento, after several people saw a listing on Craigslist (see [bottom of page for text](#))

[and photos from Craigslist ad](#)) and contacted SaveABunny. The breeder was closing down and offered the bunnies (as meat or to breed) and cages

The rabbit “rescue” said the meat breeder was looking for \$1000.

Following off a rabbit “rescue” list seeking funds:

11/13/07 [Chenoa Manor](#) to help with a rescue of 40 meat rabbits in Chesterfield, MI.

2/29/08 [Luv-N-Bunns](#) to help with the care of 52 meat rabbits about to be slaughtered in Michigan.

5/7/08 [Wild Rescue](#) of Texas to help with neutering and spaying unaltered and breeding shelter rabbits in Texas

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