

## The Rabbit Education Society 2009 edition

The Rabbit Education Society is a group of rabbit breeders and fanciers who work to educate the public about rabbit issues and provide accurate information about rabbits. We maintain a website at <http://www.rabbited.0catch.com> and a mailing list on yahoo at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Rabbit-Ed-Society>

# Husbandry Guidelines & Standard for Show Rabbits

## Rabbit Classification

### Livestock, Companion Animal, Or What?

Rabbit Classification: Rabbits cannot be defined as solely livestock or companion animal as they are unique and multi-purpose with any single 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 raisers in the United States.

The domestic rabbit is the only 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.

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 just don’t see other animal breeders crossing over into so many varied purposes.

### Rabbit Statistics:

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| 35,000 members of the American Rabbit Breeders Assoc. and represent show breeders (USDA) |
| 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 for fur worldwide  |
| *136 USDA inspected dealers or breeders with approximately 84,000 rabbits                |
| *2,500 rabbits owned by 351 USDA licensed exhibitors                                     |
| 5.3 million kept as pets (American Pet Products Manufacturing Assoc. 2002)               |

\*Hobby breeders are not required to be licensed by the USDA, the above noted as USDA license holders would be considered commercial pet breeders or animal exhibitors. According to the USDA only about 1 in 10 people who raise rabbits are ARBA members (ARBA has about 35,000 members).

“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](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/ceah/cei/IW_2000_files/rabbitcal.htm)

The USDA does not currently classify rabbits as livestock. 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.

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 or even new laws. This is inappropriate because rabbits have always been a traditional and legitimate source of meat for both humans and other animals. Rabbit meat is actually healthier than chicken. Since it is inexpensive to raise rabbits this also makes an excellent source of food for anyone especially low income Americans.

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 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 a few 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 and/or home consumption.

To date no entity has enacted a law classifying rabbits as "multi-purpose" which would be a new category representing a mix of livestock and companion animal classifications. 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 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. 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 (3). 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.

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.(2)

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.(2)

**Commercial Breeder:** Herd number can easily go over a few hundred the purpose in breeding is primarily to raise rabbits for food and/or fiber as a 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).

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.**(2)

**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 (3).

**"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 (2). 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.

## Care Guidelines For Show Breeders

**Animal Welfare:** In recent years more attention has been paid to the animal rights movement whose goal is to eliminate all animal use. Legislators and the general public mistakenly look to animal rights organizations as the authority on animal welfare. However when

it comes to animal use these organizations are philosophically opposed to all use as well as inexperienced in breeding or farming techniques and unfamiliar with breeding or farming issues.

As a result many of the so-called humane farming standards drafted by these groups are inaccurate and actually promote inhumane breeding or farming. Farming or breeding practices that are viewed as “inhumane” by the general public are usually the result of a lack of understanding by the non-breeding or non-farming public. If one does not raise animals one cannot understand the “why” behind many practices and misunderstanding results. Therefore animal rights organizations are not qualified to comment on or draft proper and humane husbandry standards for breeders or farmers.

This document has been drafted by rabbit breeders who understand rabbits and have long term working relationships with the species. These standards were drafted to be humane, as the foremost ideal in the mind of the breeder is to treat their animals humanely. An animal that is suffering is not a productive animal.

The Australian code for livestock production looks at 5 basic requirements in humane animal production:

<http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/animal-welfare/codes/companion-animals/index.htm>

- *freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition,*
- *provision of appropriate comfort and shelter,*
- *prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment of injury, disease or infestation with parasites,*
- *freedom from distress,*

*ability to display normal patterns of behaviour*

Existing Law: Humane care of animals means, but is not limited to, the provision of adequate ventilation, sanitary shelter, and wholesome and adequate food and water, consistent with the normal requirements and feeding habits of the animal's size, species, and breed. Inhumane care includes any act, omission, or neglect which causes unjustifiable physical pain, suffering, or death to any living animal.(2)

We have tried to address as many methods of rabbit breeding as possible in this document. However, one cannot list every method, structure, device, etc that is used by breeders and meets the definition of humane animal care. Omission of a particular method, device, structure, or other does not mean they are not humane or meet with acceptable breeding practices. What is listed here tends to be the more popular methods of breeding show rabbits.

## The Rabbit:

| Breed         | Size (4)                 | Examples                       |
|---------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Dwarf Breeds  | 2-3 lbs adult weight     | Netherland Dwarf, Polish       |
| Small Breeds  | 3-6 lbs adult weight     | Dutch, Florida White, Mini-Rex |
| Medium Breeds | 6-9 lbs adult weight     | Rex, Californian,              |
| Large Breeds  | 9-11 lbs adult weight    | Satin, New Zealand             |
| Giant Breeds  | Over 11 lbs adult weight | Checkered Giant, Flemish Giant |

A complete listing of recognized rabbit breeds for show purposes can be found in the American Rabbit Breeders Association Standard of Perfection along with weight ranges and “ideal” weights. Due to the variations among individual rabbits within breeds one cannot use the above weights or

those in the Standard of Perfection to accurately determine if a rabbit is under or overweight. For example the SOP states the "ideal" weight of a Netherland Dwarf is 2 lbs and the weight limit for an adult is 2 ½ lbs. Netherland Dwarfs can vary quite a bit from those weights, you can find purebred healthy Netherlands who weight 3-4 lbs, or even just over 1 lb.

### 1)Housing facilities.

-Rabbits can be kept indoors or out, year round. The comfort zone for a rabbit is 50-60 degrees Fahrenheit (7). The comfort zone does not mean the animal's environment must be kept at these temperatures. The comfort zone is the point at which temperatures below or above it cause the animal to expend energy to maintain body temperature. (15) Rabbits are able to withstand below freezing temperatures and can handle the cold better than excessive heat.

-Indoor and outdoor housing facilities for animals should be maintained in accordance with normal facility maintenance practices, should protect the animal from injury; and should contain the animal. Rabbitries are not required to have running water or electricity. Flooring can be dirt, concrete, or some other material. Flooring does not have to be water resistant or easily sanitized.

- Acceptable structures used to house a rabbitry: Garage, shed, porch, basement, hutch, barn, open-sided barns, other structures as well (21). Much depends on the climate where the rabbitry is located. Warmer climates will likely be more concerned about cooling rather than heating whereas a rabbitry in a colder climate will be designed to retain heat.

- A variety of caging systems are used, primarily an indoor rabbitry will use single tier rows of cages with pans underneath or worm beds; or stacked cages-3 or 4 high. Floors in indoor rabbitries do not have to be made of concrete. Concrete can actually contribute to excessive ammonia and humidity in a rabbitry. (15) Some rabbitries employ single tier cages hanging over a pit to collect the manure, which is then shoveled out at regular intervals. However the time interval can even be annually or quarterly or more frequently. Some such set-ups will leave the manure and instead cultivate worm beds which adds some additional income. Either method is acceptable husbandry practice. Use of dirt floors is also acceptable as is other types of flooring material.

-Outdoor rabbitries typically use hutches to house the rabbits.

There are other non-traditional methods of housing rabbits which meet standards for humane farming practices as well.

Existing Law:

Structural strength. Indoor and outdoor housing facilities for rabbits should be structurally sound and should be maintained in good repair, to protect the animals from injury, to contain the animals, and to restrict the entrance of other animals. (6)

Ventilation. Housing facilities for animals should be ventilated with fresh air either by means of windows, doors, vents, or fans. Air conditioning is NOT required. Ventilation does not have to operate 24 hours consecutively as it's primary purpose is to provide fresh air to reduce ammonia odors and moisture build-up which will be influenced by a number of varying factors. It is NOT a sign of neglect if a breeder doesn't have windows open 24/7, or a fan running, etc. One may not have a window open in the middle of winter in order to help keep the rabbitry warm. One may shut the rabbitry up mid-day in summer to try and prevent it from heating up or becoming too humid. Every case must be looked at individually. The key is whether or not a majority of rabbits are healthy.

-Poor ventilation signs: condensation and ammonia odor (4). Despite attempts to reduce the amount of ammonia produced by rabbits some will always be present (26). Detectable ammonia odor should be kept to a minimum but factors such as humidity and temperature will have an effect as much as frequency of waste removal. Obviously an overpowering smell of ammonia would be an indication of a management problem however at present we do not have a good

method to measure what is an allowable level of ammonia in a rabbitry and individuals have varying tolerance levels for the amount of detectable ammonia in the air. Purina Mills states that if your nose and eyes become "irritated" this is the first sign of poor air quality. (33) At this time we do not know the necessary number of air changes per hour for rabbits, recommendations can be found as low as 2 ACH up to 10-15 ACH.

#### Indoor

(a) Heating & Cooling. Indoor housing facilities for rabbits need not be heated. Heating during the winter may actually increase the amount of ammonia in the rabbit's environment (26). Air conditioning is also not a requirement for proper housing. Breeders use other means to cool the rabbit's environment including water walls, trees, swamp coolers, misters, frozen water bottles, shade cloth or solar screens, exhaust fans, or soaker hoses on barn roof. (30) One can never completely prevent problems with either extremes of temperature. Air conditioning may also restrict the necessary amount of proper ventilation required by rabbits for a healthy environment.

(b) Ventilation. Indoor housing facilities for rabbits should be adequately ventilated to provide for the health and comfort of the animals. Such facilities can be provided with fresh air either by means of windows, doors, vents, or fans and should be ventilated so as to minimize drafts, odors, and moisture condensation.

(c) Lighting. Indoor housing facilities for rabbits should have ample light, by natural or artificial means, be of good quality and well distributed. Artificial lighting is not required. Primary enclosures should be so placed as to protect the rabbits from excessive illumination including direct sunlight (if it is likely to cause the animal to overheat).

### Outdoor

Rabbits can tolerate low temps and excessive cold, they must be kept dry as a wet rabbit will not be able to maintain body temperature.

Shade. Outdoor housing facilities should provide each animal with a section of shade that covers each animal's entire body from the rays of the sun.

Rabbits can tolerate low temps and excessive cold, they must be kept free from drafts or wetness.

### Facilities, outdoor.

(a) Shelter from sunlight. When sunlight is likely to cause overheating or discomfort, sufficient shade should be provided to allow all rabbits kept outdoors to protect themselves from the direct rays of the sun.

(b) Shelter from rain or snow. Rabbits kept outdoors should be provided with access to shelter to allow them to remain dry during rain or snow.

(c) Shelter from cold weather. Shelter should be provided for all rabbits kept outdoors when the atmospheric temperature falls below 40° F.

(d) Protection from predators. Outdoor housing facilities for rabbits can be fenced or otherwise enclosed to minimize the entrance of predators but is not required.

(e) Drainage. A suitable method should be provided to rapidly eliminate excess water.

### Primary Enclosures-Cages

Definition: Primary enclosure means any structure or device used to restrict an animal or animals to a limited amount of space such as a building, room, pen, run, cage, aquarium, hutch, stall, paddock, pasture, or animal transfer vehicle.(2)

## Cage Size:

-The primary enclosure should be constructed and maintained so as to provide sufficient space for the animal contained therein to make normal postural adjustments and have full freedom of movement.

The common rule of thumb measurement for calculating minimum cage size is to figure  $\frac{3}{4}$  sq ft per lb of adult body weight (4), (15). The USDA requires minimum cage sizes based on the weight of rabbits. They start at 4.4 lbs and less although their chart does not take into account the difference between a 4 lb rabbit and the Netherland Dwarf breed which has a show weight limit of 2  $\frac{1}{2}$  lbs and an ideal weight of 2 lbs. (ARBA Standard Of Perfection). The recommended cage size for adult Netherland Dwarfs from the American Netherland Dwarf Rabbit Club is 18"x24"(5). Smaller cages are acceptable for use for juniors or use as a temporary cage. There is variation in what is considered the "minimum" size so one should use as a guide the ability of the rabbit to make normal postural adjustments and have full freedom of movement.

USDA recommendations:

Rabbits less than 4.4 lbs 1.5 square feet with a litter 4 square feet

4.4lbs-8.8lbs 3 square feet with a litter 5 square feet

8.8lbs-11.9lbs 4 square feet with a litter 6 square feet

Over 11.9 lbs 5 square feet with a litter 7.5 square feet

Minimum cage heights can be 12" to 18" (15,17,34).

Weanlings, promising juniors, quarantined rabbits, or mothers newly removed from their litters may be kept in smaller temporary cages and the size will vary based on the breed. The key is if the rabbit can move around.

-Primary enclosures should be structurally sound and constructed so as to permit the animal within them to remain dry.

-The floors of the primary enclosure that are not a solid surface usually are constructed using 14 gauge wire 1" x  $\frac{1}{2}$ " design or slatted flooring which larger breeds favor. 1/2 x 1/2 hardware cloth for the floor wire is also used by some but it doesn't have the lifespan of galvanized wire. Cages with solid flooring should contain litter such as pine shavings to absorb moisture and urine.

-Primary enclosures should be structurally sound and maintained in good repair to protect the rabbits from injury, to contain them, and to keep predators out. Primary enclosures are not expected to always maintain a pristine like new appearance. Discoloration due to exposure to urine or rust is acceptable as long as it does not negatively affect the rabbit contained within.

-Primary enclosures shall be constructed and maintained so that the rabbits contained therein have convenient access to clean food and water as required

-All wire cages are humane, the feet of a rabbit is protected by a thick pad of hair to prevent sore hocks (20). Sore hocks are caused by a number of different factors usually several of these factors occurring together (25), (29). These factors include an inherited predisposition, disease condition, management issues such as high humidity, dirty environment in the cage, and rough surfaces on the cage (25). A rabbit being housed on a wire floor with or without a solid section to stand on is not the cause of sore hocks. An all wire floor is very sanitary as the rabbit is kept away from it's waste and the environment tends to stay dry. Rabbits adapt quite well to being housed in cages (32).

-A suitable nest box containing clean nesting material shall be provided in each primary enclosure housing a female with a litter less than 21 days of age or at least until the litter begins coming out of the box, around 15-21 days. (15) The longer a nestbox is used the greater the chance of eye

infections and other disease problems (15). Suitable nesting material includes softwood shavings. There is no evidence softwood shavings contribute to liver damage or cancer, or respiratory problems. (31) Suitable material for the nestbox itself includes plywood or metal (21). The size of the nestbox will vary based on breed size with an 18"x10" w x 10" h suitable for most commercial breeds (21). The nestbox need only be large enough for a doe to kindle and nurse her young. A larger than necessary size encourages does to sit in their nestbox thereby soiling it and threatening the health of the offspring. Also if the babies have too much room it increases the chance of a litter becoming separated and one group missing feedings from the doe.

## Separation of Rabbits.

Adult and sexually maturing rabbits of the same sex can fight and should be separated before they begin fighting. As long as fighting isn't occurring it is acceptable to house more than one rabbit in the same cage. Females can be kept together longer than male/female or male/male combinations. Siblings will mate and should be separated prior to the female reaching sexual maturity.

Age of Adulthood:

5-6 mos. Dwarf & small breeds

5-8 mos. medium & large breeds

8-12 mos. giant breeds

Group housing rabbits is not recommend for breeders. Problems encountered when group housing includes disease problems, fighting, management problems, false pregnancies, fur pulling, and difficulty identifying individuals (22). Aggressive behavior by group housed rabbits in a study included fighting which caused eyelid and scrotal injuries (22). Rabbits urinated on each other, pulled fur, exhibited mounting behavior, and there were incidences of false pregnancies (22). In a study on group housing (22) fighting caused 41% of the reported conditions requiring treatment. The threat of disease spread is also a factor in the decision not to group house rabbits. Rabbits do fine individually housed. Evidence exists that suggests in the wild females stay isolated from each other (22).

- Rabbits under quarantine or treatment for a communicable disease should be separated from other rabbits and other susceptible species of animals in such a manner as to minimize dissemination of such disease. This could be quarantined in a separate building, area in the same rabbitry, or material placed around a cage to prevent transmission of disease.

## Sanitation

Existing Law: Sanitation means the maintenance of conditions conducive to health and involves bedding changes as appropriate, cleaning, and disinfection. Cleaning removes excessive amounts of dirt and debris, and disinfection reduces or eliminates unacceptable concentration of microorganisms. To sanitize therefore, means to make physically clean, and to the maximum degree practical, remove and destroy agents injurious to health.(2)

-Waste disposal. Provision should be made for the removal and disposal of animal and food wastes, bedding, dead animals, and debris. Despite attempts to reduce the amount of ammonia produced by rabbits some will always be present (26). Detectable ammonia odor should be kept to a minimum but factors such as humidity and temperature will have an effect as much as frequency of waste removal. Obviously an overpowering smell of ammonia would be an indication of a management problem however at present we do not have a good method to measure what is an allowable level of ammonia in a rabbitry.

-Cleaning of primary enclosures. Primary enclosures should be kept reasonably free of excreta, hair, cobwebs and other debris by periodic cleaning. Measures should be taken to prevent the wetting of rabbits in such enclosures if a washing process is used.



-Primary enclosures for rabbits should be sanitized as needed-Traditionally breeders clean cage trays once per week, twice if housed on solid bottom cages.

-In primary enclosures equipped with solid floors, soiled litter should be removed and replaced with clean litter as needed, most breeders clean it at least once each week.

-If primary enclosures are equipped with wire or mesh floors, the troughs or pans under such enclosures in general are cleaned about once each week. If worm bins are used under such enclosures they should be maintained in a sanitary condition.

-Prior to the introduction of rabbits into empty primary enclosures previously occupied, such enclosures should be sanitized

-Primary enclosures for rabbits can be sanitized by washing them with hot water (180° F) and soap or detergent as in a mechanical cage washer, or by washing all soiled surfaces with a safe and effective disinfectant, or by cleaning all soiled surfaces with live steam or flame.

-Pest control. An effective program for the control of insects, ectoparasites, and avian and mammalian pests should be established and maintained. This can be as simple as putting out mousetraps as needed, flypaper, etc. Hobby breeders should not be held to commercial standards since they are not in business to profit and cannot recoup expenses. Routine prophylactic de-worming is unnecessary for rabbits (32).

-Waste Disposal: Provisions should be made for the regular and safe removal and disposal of animal and food wastes, bedding, dead animals, and debris, so as to minimize vermin infestation, contamination, odors, and disease hazards.

Existing Law:

CITY OF PALACIOS: The owner or person in possession of animals shall keep yards, pens, and enclosures in which such animals are confined in such a manner so as not to give off odors offensive to persons of ordinary sensibilities residing in the vicinity, or to breed or attract flies, mosquitoes, or other noxious insects, or, in any manner, to endanger the public health or safety, or create a public nuisance. (1985 Code of Ordinances, Chapter 2, Section 12A)

## Feeding

Adequate food and water means food and water which is sufficient in amount and appropriate for a rabbit to prevent starvation, dehydration, or a significant risk to the rabbit's health from a lack of food or water. (2)

Adequate food means palatable, non-contaminated, and nutritionally adequate feed which is fed according to the species requirements.

-Storage of food. Supplies of feed should be stored in sealed containers or other containers which protects the food against insect infestation and/or contamination.

-Feeding. All animals should be fed at least once a day. Rabbits do not need constant access to feed as this can lead to obesity and health problems (21). Again the amount fed per day is determined on an individual basis. The food should be accessible, free from contamination and/or insect infestation, and shall be of sufficient quantity and nutritive value to meet the minimal daily requirements for the condition and size of the animal as set forth by the commercial feed industry. A licensed veterinarian may not be a good source for information as most receive little training in rabbits and others use diet recommendations from "rescue" or "house rabbit" groups which is incorrect for show rabbits and often inaccurate for pet rabbits.

Typical Feed Amounts:

2-3 oz of pellets per day for small breeds

6-8oz. for medium sized breeds  
8-10oz for large breeds

-All food receptacles shall be kept clean and sanitized as needed. If self feeders are used for the feeding of dry feed, measures should be taken to prevent molding, deterioration or caking of the feed.

## Water

Adequate water means clean, fresh, potable water offered to pets at suitable intervals according to species requirements.(2)

-All watering receptacles should be sanitized when dirty or to prevent algae build up or contamination. Water in bowls or bottles does not need to be changed daily unless it has been contaminated.

If environmental temperatures fall below the freezing level the breeder may have to take steps to ensure the rabbits are receiving enough water to allow for proper feed intake to maintain body temperature. **It is not a requirement to keep water unfrozen at all times.** Practical experience has shown that rabbits do not have to have continuous access to unfrozen water to maintain proper health. (21)

If water bowls freeze the breeder may water rabbits more frequently and also provide fresh water at feeding time. Since rabbits often chew electrical cords keeping water bowls unfrozen using some sort of heater or heat tape may not be safe or practical. Those with automatic watering systems may use heat tape or cable to keep lines unfrozen, some may also be able to allow a continuous drip to keep it from freezing. But for some climates the temperatures would not allow for continued use of an automatic water system over winter. The amount fed may have to be increased and straw or hay may be used in the cages.

## Weaning Requirements

Minimum age to sell means at an age that no longer requires parental nurturing for survival, or at an age that can be sustained from nutritional food given by persons who are knowledgeable in the practice of hand feeding. It is common for a breeder to wean rabbits at 6 weeks but not sell them until 8 weeks or later. Commercial meat breeders often wean rabbits at 4-5 weeks of age. Practical experience and research has shown that 4 week old rabbits are able to survive without parental nurturing. Wild rabbits from which domestics have retained many behaviors, wean their babies at 4 weeks so the nest is ready for the next litter that was conceived after kindling the first. Thus far there is nothing to suggest domestic rabbits need to stay with their mothers longer than 4-5 weeks.

Selling rabbits as pets is different due to the numerous stresses of moving from breeder to store to pet owner so that is why sales of **pet** rabbits is often set at a minimum of 8 weeks of age. State laws or the USDA regulate age at which a pet rabbit can be sold.

## Breeding

It is common to kept does in production to avoid fertility problems or problems giving birth. The average breeder will breed a doe between 2-4 times per year, however they can be bred more often and typically commercial rabbitries use a more intensive breeding schedule. According to Rabbit Production one needs an estimated 5 litters per year from each doe to met expenses. Breed back schedules vary and can be as short as 24 hours after kindling (15). The rabbit's reproductive system is different from most animals. They do not have heat seasons rather they are induced ovulators-eggs are released during mating. Also it has been observed among wild rabbits that the doe will kindle a litter and then remate producing another litter 31 days later. If a rabbit does not have adequate nutrients to maintain good health they can reabsorb a litter so there is a natural process to ensure the doe stays healthy and productive (15). A doe not

regularly bred can easily accumulate fat deposits which make delivery difficult or make conception more difficult.

Breeders also use several different breeding systems:

- Inbreeding: Mating individuals who are closely related such as father/daughter, mother/son. Brother/sister combinations are also used on occasion as test matings to determine genetic recessives but not done often by show breeders.
- Linebreeding: Mating less closely related individuals. This is very commonly used by show breeders. Usually a show breeder will mate parents and offspring as a form of linebreeding, adding unrelated or less closely related rabbits to keep the gene pool strong.
- Outcrossing" Breeding same breed but unrelated individuals.
- Crossbreeding: Breeding unrelated individuals of different breeds.

Inbreeding and linebreeding are valid breeding systems. Groups or individuals who say inbreeding or linebreeding should not be done probably have little understanding of genetics. One must be wary of genetic problems when breeding closely related individuals but this system also increases the chances of passing on desirable traits. Outcrossing does not guarantee there will be no genetic problems as what genes the offspring receive-good or bad is dependent on what genes the parents carry.

Rabbits can be bred year round including outside in winter.

### **Identification:**

Rabbits are commonly tattooed in one ear for identification purposes. Tattooing a rabbit is not inhumane and does create a permanent identification method that travels with the rabbit. Lack of identification is also acceptable as it other forms such as cage tags or marking pens.

### **Health care:**

Proper animal health care means a program of disease control and prevention, veterinary care if required, and humane euthanasia. The animal health care should be sufficient to prevent unnecessary physical pain or suffering (2). It is important to note that due to a lack of education about rabbit disease a breeder is often more knowledgeable than their local veterinarian. Due to this most breeders treat disease problems themselves. In many cases of common rabbit disease a breeder will have the rabbit euthanized thereby reducing the health risk to the rest of the herd. If a medical problem falls outside the realm of the breeder's knowledge an experienced veterinarian may be consulted if the animal is suffering and the breeder wishes to attempt to cure the condition rather than euthanize it. However providing veterinary care should not a requirement for hobby breeders.

## **Cage Enrichment**

"It is reasonable to assume that any system that adversely affects the animal's welfare will also reduce its productivity" (15)

Ensuring animals involved in breeding programs are able to express "natural" behaviors has become a hot button topic. Again the rabbit breeder wants to ensure their animals are raised humanely and methods of rabbit production used do their best to ensure the safety and health of the animal within the breeder's ability to implement them. Although the domestic rabbit is descended from the European wild rabbit they do not necessarily have the same behavioral requirements. A marked difference between wild and domestic rabbits is their response to confinement. While wild rabbits seldom do well confined domestic rabbits thrive. A confined wild rabbit usually exhibits signs of stress and may not mature sexually. (15) The process of domestication which has gone on for perhaps a couple thousand years has produced an animal that is much calmer when confined. This is important to understand because while some

behaviors are similar between wild and domestic rabbits not all are. One cannot say a domestic rabbit has to be able to mimic all the behaviors of a wild rabbit when attempting to develop standards for cage “enrichment”.

At this time we lack evidence that rabbits actually require anything special to enrich their environments. Some breeders provide toys such as a block of wood to chew, pinecones, empty cans to toss, or even simply hay or straw. One study found that providing chew sticks or an empty can was sufficient (24). One study that examined the effects of providing straw for cage enrichment found that after initial interest by the rabbits they quickly lost interest in the straw. (16) Another study discussed rabbits displaying “natural behaviors” which included hopping, standing on their hind legs, and social interaction (23). Rabbits utilized in current rabbit breeding settings are able to display these behaviors with the possible exception of social interaction. More research has to be done in order to accurately set standards for cage enrichment assuming anything more is really necessary.

**-Group housing vs. single housing:** Rabbits are territorial by nature so when grouped together fighting often occurs (15), (22). Due to their powerful hind legs and claws fighting can lead to very serious injury or death so group housing is usually not pursued. However the use of wire cages does allow for rabbits to see and hear other rabbits and that may well be all the social interaction a rabbit requires. During breeding bucks and does are allowed to interact. Does and offspring are allowed to interact socially until the babies are weaned. Due to the natural behaviors of rabbits that include fighting it is often more humane to keep rabbits physically separated from each other.

**-Digging and burrowing:** Wild rabbits rely on burrows for protection from predators. Studies that compared the behaviors of wild and domestic rabbits have found that domestics are less vigilant to danger and don't seek shelter in burrows as well as spent their resting periods above ground. (15) Therefore it is not necessary to provide the rabbit with an environment where they can dig burrows.

**-Housing rabbits outside on the ground:** In a study comparing rabbits kindled and finished inside in cages, kindled inside in cages then moved to an outdoor pasture pen, and rabbits kindled and raised in a movable pasture pen the authors found the rabbits raised and finished inside in cages had higher growth rates, final weights, carcass weights, and finished faster than rabbits in the other two groups (18). Based on this research we see no reason to recommend breeders change from housing rabbits in wire cages inside a barn to some sort of old fashioned pen on the ground. Rabbits housed in pens on the ground in groups would also have a greater risk of parasites than their counterparts in sanitary wire cages as well as incidences of fighting and risk of serious injury. A breeder should be allowed to house rabbits in pens on the ground if they wish but because of it's disadvantages it is not a choice most breeders choose.

## License fees

-Recognition that most Show (hobby) rabbit breeders are losing money therefore they should be exempt from fees. Licensing or inspection programs always end up costing people money to comply with and will place an undue hardship on a hobby breeder. Currently there is no evidence that there is a need to regulate hobby breeders. Regulation is often promoted by animal rights activists and “rescuers” who are opposed to breeding and showing animals. They know that regulation and it's associated costs would put most hobby breeders out of existence and that is why they promote it. Often these regulations conveniently exempt animal shelters and “rescuers” which gives them an unfair trade advantage over pet stores and hobby breeders.

64% of breeders report losing money breeding, 29% break-even while only 7% make any kind of profit. (3)

Hobby Breeder Profiles (3)

Provide written care instructions? 90% yes  
Have a take back policy for unwanted pet rabbits sold? 88% yes  
Do you provide toys? 79% Yes  
Do you provide exercise? 78% Yes  
Factors you consider when breeding your rabbits: Health 94%, Improve your line & breed 94%,  
Breed towards the standard 92%, Temperament 86%  
78% consider all 4 factors  
Demand for pet rabbits is: 51% Low, 37% Medium, 12% High  
Number of Breeds Raised by Hobby Breeders:  
1 breed 38%  
2 breeds 24%  
3 breeds 15%  
4 breeds 8%  
5+ breeds 14%

Average herd size:\*

1 breed 35 rabbits  
2 breeds 40 rabbits  
3 breeds 49 rabbits  
4 breeds 74 rabbits  
5+ breeds 100 rabbits

\*Note that this average only includes adults kept as part of the breeding/showing program and does not reflect the number of juniors kept as possible replacement breeders, youngsters for sale as well as adult rabbits for sale. The true number of rabbits kept by a hobby breeder will be higher than the above numbers reflect. Any sort of number limit should only apply to permanent members of the show/breeding program and not include animals for sale and possible replacement juniors.

Average number of litters produced per year

1 breed 14 litters  
2 breeds 21 litters  
3 breeds 25 litters  
4 breeds 37 litters  
5+ breeds 60 litters

Average number of times a Hobby Breeder breeds a single doe in one year

Once 7%  
Twice 33%  
Three times 39%  
Four times 10%  
5 or more times 11%

Average number of pet rabbits a Hobby Breeder sells:

1-10 48%  
11-25 30%  
26-50 14%  
51-75 1%  
76-100 1%  
100-150 4%  
200+ 1%

Uses For Excess Stock

Pets- 78%

Meat- 53%  
Breeding/show- 30%  
Fur- 2%  
Wool- 2%  
Other- 16%

### **Humane Euthanasia :**

Acceptable methods include: Cervical Dislocation (8), (11), (15) Stunning by Blow to the head (7), (9), (12), (13), (15), captive bolt (8), bullet shot to head, electricity (electrocution or use for stunning) (8), (12), (13), and carotid artery severance (8). Chemical methods are also approved (8), (14) but due to concerns about tainting the rabbit meat are generally not used if the rabbit is going to be consumed.

The RSPCA Australia policy statement on humane euthanasia states that “an animal must be either killed instantly or instantaneously rendered insensible to pain until death supervenes.” Their 2001 edition establishes basic criteria for determining if a method is humane. These are:

- Death without panic, pain, or distress
- Instant death or unconsciousness
- Reliability for both single or large numbers
- Simplicity and minimal maintenance
- Minimal environmental impact
- Minimal emotional impact on operators or observers

Federal legislation concerning humane euthanasia:

<http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OPPDE/rdad/FSISDirectives/6900.2Rev1.htm>

*US Humane Methods of Slaughter Act of 1978. (7 U.S.C. 1901 et seq.)*

#### **Sec. 1902. - Humane methods**

*No method of slaughtering or handling in connection with slaughtering shall be deemed to comply with the public policy of the United States unless it is humane. Either of the following two methods of slaughtering and handling are hereby found to be humane:*

*(a) in the case of cattle, calves, horses, mules, sheep, swine, and other livestock, all animals are rendered insensible to pain by a single blow or gunshot or an electrical, chemical or other means that is rapid and effective, before being shackled, hoisted, thrown, cast, or cut; or*

*(b) by slaughtering in accordance with the ritual requirements of the Jewish faith or any other religious faith that prescribes a method of slaughter whereby the animal suffers loss of consciousness by anemia of the brain caused by the simultaneous and instantaneous severance of the carotid arteries with a sharp instrument and handling in connection with such slaughtering.*

*“Rabbits that are processed in commercial facilities undergo electrical stunning, which renders the animal unconscious, and then are decapitated. In smaller processing facilities or on-site slaughter, however, manual methods are used. Two methods have been recommended for manual stunning (Arrington and Kelly, 1976; Sandford, 1986). The first method is cervical dislocation. When performed by a competent person, cervical dislocation renders the rabbit unconscious immediately. The second method involves the use of a blunt stick to strike the rabbit behind the ears at the base of the skull. Generally, cervical dislocation is the preferred method for manual stunning. Welfare problems arise when inexperienced personnel attempt to perform the stunning. Care should be taken to properly train personnel before they attempt to manually stun a rabbit. Trainees should learn the proper way to handle the rabbit to reduce excitability and stress; observe the technique being performed by a competent individual; and perform the technique under supervision until competence is attained.” (7)*

**AVMA:**

*"Recommendations - When properly executed, manual cervical dislocation is a humane technique for euthanasia of poultry, other small birds, mice, rats weighing <200 g, and rabbits weighing <1 kg. In heavier rats and rabbits, the greater muscle mass in the cervical region makes manual cervical dislocation physically more difficult; accordingly, it should be performed only with mechanical dislocators or by individuals who have demonstrated proficiency euthanizing heavier animals." (14)*

## Animal Cruelty & Neglect Issues

Inspection of Premises: Should only be done during reasonable daylight business hours with the permission of the breeder or a properly executed search warrant.

-To determine if an animal is starving it is important to assess the body condition of the rabbit and determine if food is stored on the property. Note that some breeds are normally slender and racy in body types (i.e. Belgian Hares). Rabbits undergoing a molt will lose flesh condition and their coat may look terrible, this is not a sign of neglect. An empty food bowl is not a sign of neglect as rabbits are traditionally fed once per day. Unlimited or free feeding rabbits leads to obesity and health problems. In addition one cannot look at one rabbit that may be lean and determine that there is a problem with the entire herd. Also, it is important to distinguish between a single animal appearing lean and the whole herd. If a single animal is not eating, that may not mean the whole herd is being neglected. An accurate body condition scoring guide has not been developed for rabbits. It is recommended to check with the ARBA Standard of Perfection for a guide to the weight ranges for various breeds. (17) It is equally important to note that ARBA breed standards lists weight limits for show purposes and does not actually list what are normal weights for the various breeds. Weight ranges by breed can vary for example the show weight limit for a Netherland Dwarf is 2 ½ lbs, the "ideal" weight is listed as 2 lbs. However this is only applicable for show purposes. Healthy Netherland Dwarfs can vary greatly in weight, you can find a healthy one weighing less than 2 lbs as well as healthy ones weighing over 2 ½ lbs.

-During periods of molt it isn't uncommon for a quantity of loose fur around the rabbitry and stuck to cages.

-Be aware that odor is caused by urine and tends to be more concentrated in hot humid weather. Find out how often cages are cleaned, noting that it is acceptable to clean cage drop pans once or less per week.

-Check the amount of manure in drop pans or solid bottom cages to assess whether or not the animals are being cleaned regularly. Note that many rabbits use one corner as a bathroom and a pile of poop in that area is not a problem.

## Zoning Issues

Legislators need to recognize the right of Americans to engage in the breeding and showing of animals and not draft into law unreasonable restrictions to those rights. Many local governments have erroneously labeled rabbits as "livestock" and therefore prohibited their keeping or restricted the number allowed on property. Earlier we have discussed the multi-purpose classification that rabbits deserve, they should not be lumped into the "livestock" category. The next obstacle to rabbit breeders and pet owners is setting a limit on the number of rabbits one is allowed to have.

The Rabbit Education Society believes that there should not be a limit placed on the number of rabbits one is allowed on their property due to the following reasons:

- Rabbits do not need the acreage animals such as horses, cows, and even dogs need
- There are not a large number of rabbit show breeders in existence therefore there won't likely be a need to restrict rabbit numbers. ARBA membership has numbered around 30,000 for most of the 1990's.
- Problems for neighbors such as odor, noise, and waste removal are non-existent in regards to rabbits
- There is no negative impact on a property where rabbits are being raised for show purposes.

Impact to Land

Number of Rabbits that can be raised on 1 Acre of Land:

Experts in the field have estimated that one can safely house at least 1,000 rabbits of any breed on 1 acre of land without any detrimental results to property or neighbors. In an area 30' wide x 3' deep one can house 40 single caged medium size breed rabbits, for small breeds one can house the same 40 single caged rabbits in a 20'x2' area. One can understand why a large number of rabbits can easily be sustained in a small area.

## Odor

Ammonia produced by urine is what causes odor when housing rabbits. Regular cleaning and use of products to absorb urine and moisture are very effective in keeping odors contained. Urine odor is usually contained to the area around the cage and does not negatively impact on neighboring residents. In addition many breeders house their rabbits in their primary residence and that type of set-up produces no negative impact on neighboring residences.

## Effect on Land Resources

The only land resource a rabbit herd uses is water. Since they are a small animal the amount of water they consume is not enough to impact the property or surrounding neighborhood. Manure produced by rabbits is excellent fertilizer and can be applied directly to gardens, both vegetable and flower. Or the breeder can bag the manure and sell it to gardeners. Since rabbits are also a small animal they do not produce a lot of manure. Therefore there is no negative impact on the amount of animal waste a rabbit herd produces, just positives.

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## The Rabbit Education Society Standard For Responsible Breeding

Anyone breeding rabbits must recognize the need for responsibility towards the animals.

A Responsible Rabbit Breeder:

-Will not contribute to the abandoned rabbit problem by abandoning rabbits in the wild. Breeders may have a "Take Back" policy for every rabbit you sell, whether for show, breeding, or as a pet. However it is **not** a requirement because pet owners need to accept responsibility for the animals they purchase as pets. If "rescue" groups, individuals, or even animal shelters actively solicit or advertise for unwanted rabbits to sell to the public it is not considered irresponsible to give them rabbits. Rabbit "rescuers" as well "rescuers" of other species have been known to purchase rabbits at auctions. This is **not** "rescue" nor should they falsely advertise these rabbits as "abandoned" by breeders.

-Will not over breed rabbits. Overbreeding is defined as producing more animals than responsible outlets for culls can be found. Suitable outlets for culls include: pets, show/breeding stock, consumption by humans or other animals, lab use, & fur.

-Will put the health and welfare of their animals first. Health problems will be treated as soon as possible and treatment includes euthanasia. Rabbits will not be allowed to suffer. However a responsible breeder is not expected to put a lot of time or money into treating health problems. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one. For most health problems there is either an easy cure or you can never cure it. Health problems such as snuffles that can't be cured places the entire herd at risk and euthanasia is often the most responsible choice.

-Good husbandry practices as accepted by the American Rabbit Breeders Association and/or the Rabbit Education Society will be followed.

-Euthanasia will be done using a humane method as recommended by the ARBA, RES, or other rabbit breeding organization.

-Only sells rabbits that are properly weaned and not too young to leave the rabbitry.

-If a breeder sells to a pet store they will only deliver healthy rabbits who have been properly weaned and are not underage. They will also provide the pet store with written care instructions to be passed on to the new owner.

-They will deal with reputable and responsible pet stores who sell healthy, properly sexed and aged rabbits and provide written instructions to the pet owner.

-Will Breed to ensure genetic abnormalities are not perpetuated, that healthy rabbits conforming to the American Rabbit Breeders Assoc. breed standard are produced.

-Will educate every rabbit buyer and provide written care instructions

-Will be honest and reputable

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