

Rabbit “mills” Sorting Myth from Fact

RES Report On Substandard Commercial Breeding Facilities

A word about using the term “mill” or “Rabbit Mill”:

Animal rights fanatics like to use the term “mill” when discussing anything about animal breeders. The term has no real meaning or definition, it is used as propaganda to mislead people. Some rabbit specific fanatics, “rescuers”, “house” rabbit advocates, and others in the shelter industry define it as basically anyone breeding rabbits which would also include commercial meat breeders. They include anyone selling wholesale to pet stores or dealers, anyone breeding an undefined number of rabbits, anyone who is breeding as a business, and they include anyone who holds a USDA license.

In a word their thinking is INSANE. For most people the term “mill” is used to describe someone who is not taking proper care of their animals, is breeding too many to properly care for and find a suitable outlet for. Most people do not automatically call a legally operating business a “mill”. Is that even fair? The USDA has strict regulations for commercial pet breeders and they do inspections. Few people in our society have no need of money or a job, so is it fair to give a negative label to someone who is lucky enough to find a way to mix a love of breeding animals with the ability to make a living?

One must also realize those attacking commercial breeding and selling of pets are part of the community supplying pets. Think about the motivations for a moment, shelters and “rescues” have a supply of animals and are looking for a pet owner to take this supply off their hands in exchange for money. How is that really any different than a breeder or pet store offering pets to pet owners in exchange for cash. It isn't. And of course one must consider the competition angle, every shelter and “rescue” is competing with every breeder and pet store for the pet buyer. Doesn't it suddenly make sense why shelters and “rescue” would condemn breeders and pet stores. They try and get the pet buying market to believe negative things about their competition in order for shelters and “rescue” to increase their market share. Couple with that is if they can get lawmakers to back bills limiting the number a breeder can sell, or banning sales of animals in pet stores it limits consumer choices making the shelter or “rescue” the only choice.

“I wish they would just outlaw the selling of rabbits that would **force** people to get rabbits from rescue or shelters.” Rabbit Rescuer 12/10/08

It puts the “adoption first” and “every animal sold by a breeder or pet store is a death sentence for shelter animals” propaganda into perspective. Looking at industry surveys of where people obtain pets, shelters and “rescues lag behind pet stores and breeders. It's all about competition for market share.

In order to be clear about what the Rabbit Education Society means when using terms to describe irresponsible breeders we do not use the term “mill” or “rabbit mill”. We urge others to cease using it as well and find better, clearer terms when discussing these issues. The term we apply to describe a business that is not properly caring for rabbits is Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility.

I. Definition of Rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility

-A substandard commercial breeding facility is a business where rabbits are kept in filthy and unhealthy conditions and bred without regard to genetic abnormalities, health, and their welfare in great quantities solely for the pet market for profit at ages too young to ensure their survivability. A SCBF has been referred to as a “mill”, however animal rights activists now use that term to define every commercial breeder which is false and propaganda. ARAs wish to eliminate animal use and that is why they define every breeder as a “mill”, therefore this term is outdated, inaccurate, and propaganda.

-Sources of rabbits for pet stores include Substandard Commercial Breeding Facilities but perhaps to a much larger degree pet dealers. Pet dealer is another term that has several meanings. In some laws pet dealer refers to anyone selling animals as pets. A clearer definition of a pet dealer is someone who acts as a middle man between a pet store and breeders. Pet dealers will purchase animals from several sources in order to fulfill demand from pet stores. Also note pet dealer is a legal business.

II. Information From Other Groups

According to an article from Shelter Sense 10/94, HSUS (national animal rights group): "Pet Bunnies like Bugs, churned out in increasing numbers by "rabbit mills" and breeders for the lucrative pet industry, are surrendered to local shelters daily."

The HSUS has no evidence of the existence of "rabbit mills", we checked with them. In addition there is no "lucrative" pet industry for the breeders of rabbits. Most pet stores pay only \$5-\$10 each for rabbits from breeders. If one does the math supplying pet stores is far from lucrative. Rabbits are not in demand as pets like dogs, although there is increased interest at Easter time. According to the Rabbit Education Society 1998 breeder survey demand for pet rabbits is: 56% low, 30% medium, 13% high.

III. What Is a Rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility

-Sole motive in breeding rabbits is money on sales of pet rabbits to the extent that the welfare of the animals is ignored. It must be empathized that merely being a commercial breeder or in the business of breeding and selling animals does NOT make one a "mill" or a SCBF. Substandard conditions as defined by people breeding-not animal rightists who have no experience or knowledge in breeding is the determining factor.

-Conditions in the rabbitry are described as filthy, manure piled up into cages, dead babies lying around, animals sick and/or starving, odor overpowering.

-May also be raising numerous species of animals in addition to the rabbits.

-Likely selling rabbits too young (3-4 weeks of age) to capitalize on pet store's desire to have cuter, younger animals to appeal to customers. It must also be noted that pet stores AND pet rabbit buyers share some blame for under aged rabbits sold as pets. The pet stores feel the younger rabbits will sell better while customers seem more than willingly to purchase underage rabbits. One can't totally fault the breeders or pet dealers if all the stores and customers will buy are under aged rabbits.

Rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facilities are only those which meet the above description. RES recognizes that animal rights activists who tend to be fanatical in their campaign to end animal use incorrectly and inaccurately label every commercial breeder a "mill".

IV. What isn't a Rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility

One cannot use the same standards to determine a puppy Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility to determine a rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility because rabbits are not dogs. One cannot select profit as the sole factor in determining a rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility nor can you say anyone selling to pet stores is one. The two factors that must be used to determine a rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility is sole motive is profit and the welfare of the herd and offspring are ignored.

Using factors such as the number of different breeds raised, number of rabbits in herd, or if the breeder is a commercial operation are incorrect and will be misleading. Rabbits have a shorter breeding lifespan, need to be bred with some frequency to remain fertile, and naturally are able to produce offspring numerous times throughout the year. In addition rabbits are a multipurpose animal, very unique in that they are used as livestock (food source for humans and other animals) as well as a companion animal. A rabbit breeder raising more than a single breed of rabbit is not a rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility. It is common in the rabbit industry for breeders to raise multiple breeds of rabbit. And even hobby breeders have large numbers in their herds.

There are not genetic tests available for rabbits. So if there are genetic abnormalities that appear in a breeder's herd that does NOT automatically mean they have no regard for genetic problems. There are no perfect bloodlines in rabbits, mutts included. Genetic issues can and do appear and then must be bred out, something that does not happen overnight nor in one generation.

"Mills are usually over crowded, dirty, having unhealthy animals, bred to what ever is going to produce the bucks not the best crosses, etc.. As several people here stated, Bunny mills do exist, but What makes them a mill is the moving them out at little cost and lots of profit with little concern for the animals. Bunny mills are probably just breeding 2 rabbits together without consideration of breed, pedigree, quality, etc.. to get what ever will sell at the pet market." Breeder on Mailing list

The above author is correct on several accounts but is very incorrect on one very critical difference between responsible breeding and a substandard operation. They define a "mill" as breeding pairs that do not produce "quality" yet they are defining "quality" based on show standards. Breeding for "show" is not the only responsible, legitimate, or morally valid reason to breed.

What denotes quality to a show breeder will be far different from what a pet buyer will define. So is it wrong to breed and produce mixed breeds? Or select pairs that do not conform to show standards? No it isn't. The important criteria to look for is producing healthy animals and for a pet market personality and what a pet owner views as physical appearance is far more important than conformation to a show standard. Therefore someone breeding and selling mixed breeds or rabbits that do not measure up to a show standard is not a "mill".

One must also consider many show breeders past and present have dabbled with mixed breeds when working on creating new breeds and even varieties for show. Even now some breeders will bring in a rabbit of a different breed to try and enhance certain features in their purebred lines. If we allow that to occur one cannot cry "mill" just because someone not involved in showing is breeding mixed breeds to satisfy pet owner demand.

According to a 1998 American Rabbit Breeders Association survey 86.5% of breeders raise rabbits for meat, only 66.5% raise any for the pet market.

In a 1998 Rabbit Education Society survey 58% of breeders do not sell to pet stores. Other results include:

-The number of rabbits breeders sell as pets:

Sold % of breeders

0-25 71%

26-50 17%

51-75 5%

> 76 7%

-Average number those who sell to pet stores sell: 18

-Average price of a pet rabbit: \$13-\$18 (direct to pet owner price)

RES breeder survey II information:

4. How many different breeds do you raise? 1breed 38%, 2 breeds 24%, 3 breeds 15%, 4 breeds 8%, 5+ breeds 14%

5. Average herd size? I broke this down into averages based on the number of breeds

1 breed 27 rabbits

2 breeds 33 rabbits

3 breeds 49 rabbits

4 breeds 74 rabbits

5+ breeds 100 rabbits

6. 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

7. Average number of times you breed a single doe in one year

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

8. Do you raise rabbits as a hobby? 90%

As a business 5% Both 5%

9. Do you Profit 7% Break even 29% Lose money 64%

Commercial Pet Rabbit Breeders are not "mills"

From: www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/ceah/cei/rabbitcal.htm

1999 APHIS listed 36 commercial rabbit breeders with a total of 71,975 rabbits and 101 dealers with 12,283 rabbits. Remember these are licensed commercial breeders subject to federal regulations and inspections these should not be called "mills".

Be aware that recently animal rights activists have been introducing legislation to shut down so called "mills". What this legislation is trying to do is stop all commercial and hobby breeding. RES urges the general public and legislators to oppose legislation that attempts to end commercial breeding. A true "mill" is not the same as a responsible commercial breeder, don't side with animal rights activists who lie, this includes many large well funded groups many wrongly think are benign "welfare" groups.

Existing animal cruelty laws in EVERY state are sufficient to shut down substandard breeding or selling facilities. New laws are not necessary. Legislation lowering licensing thresholds are not necessary and end up hurting hobby breeders.

I was able to find a breeder who mass produces pets for sale to pet stores circa the year 2000. This individual bred primarily to sell pets to pet stores. They said they supply a number of stores covering a 5 county area with up to 1500 rabbits per year. Again doing the math, they were paid \$5 per rabbit, you end up with \$7,500 GROSS. One then has to deduct the expense of the rabbits used for breeding. In addition the individual said while the stores wanted up to 1500 rabbits per year he was unable to produce that many. He also was paying a couple friends \$3 per rabbit to help produce enough rabbits for the pet stores.

In discussing rabbits with an area pet store owner I was able to find out that his two stores buy 600 rabbits per year from one individual. The owner implied that he wanted rabbits younger than the 8 week minimum age law because they were "cuter" and that "who would know". In both these cases these breeders would meet the requirements of USDA licensing.

V. Do Rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facilities Exist?

Probably. However there is no information available to determine how many exist although it is unlikely they exist in great numbers. Additionally most if not all of these Substandard Commercial Breeding Facilities likely fall under the regulations of the Animal Welfare Act. Better enforcement of existing legislation would seem the best route to go to ensure proper care of the animals. One must remember that the goal of animal rightists is the total elimination of all animal use. So they will lie and say there are many "mills" but won't tell you they automatically include every USDA license holder, every business, and probably most every hobby breeder.

The shelter Industry secret-Shelter or rescue mills

What they also won't admit to is the large number of what one could call shelter "mills" or rescue "mills". Once you learn the dark secret of the shelter industry you will understand why they are working so hard to end pet sales....well pet sales from breeders. You see in the US there is a huge business involving "rescues" and animal shelters importing homeless animals from not only other states but other COUNTRIES. This is not regulated by anyone and animals have suffered and lost their lives due to improper transporting. In some cases imports carried rabies and other diseases putting many animals at risk as well as humans.

Look carefully at pictures and video from shelters and "rescues" after raids on animal breeders. I have seen the conditions the shelter or rescue kept the animals in post seizure and they were appalling!!! Water bowls fouled with animal waste or green with algae. In one case a rabbit "rescue" kept rabbits outdoors with only a tarp as cover from sun in pens littered with feces and food bowls over turned or contaminated. I guess because most don't view shelters or rescues as a business we tend to overlook these things. But folks, shelter mills and rescue mills do indeed exist and in large numbers because these entities have effectively exempted themselves from all animal regulation.

That's right folks, while large groups like H\$U\$ and A\$PCA are pushing for over regulation of breeders they exempt shelters and rescues. The shelter industry faces virtually no regulation, there are no protections for animals in their care. As a result there is widespread animal abuse. It's time shelters and rescues face the same regulations as pet dealers.

VI. How To Stop Rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facilities

As mentioned above better enforcement of the AWA would ensure proper care is provided to the animals. For shelter and rescue mills we need to insist they are regulated just like any other animal business and require they be regulated under the USDA. The next step is for pet buyers to demand more out of where they purchase a rabbit. Don't buy from someone who fits the description of a rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility. Demand healthy properly weaned animals if buying from a pet store. The best way is to buy your rabbit from a reputable breeder directly. A loss of demand would put many if not all rabbit Substandard Commercial Breeding Facility out of business.

VII. Myths about Rabbit breeding

Many involved in the shelter industry spend a considerable amount of time bashing animal breeders. Very often what they write is inaccurate if not an outright untruth. Let's look at some of the myths out there involving "rabbit mills".

"The operation in which rabbits are raised is called a rabbitry. Most people outside of the rabbit breeding community have never seen a rabbitry. The rabbitry closely resembles a battery hen operation, with row after row of wire cages, often stacked. The rabbits spend their entire lives on wire bottom cages, which often cause sores on their feet and possibly broken toes from getting caught in the wire. Except for mother rabbits with babies, each rabbit lives singly, in its own small, wire cage. Female rabbits are bred repeatedly. When they are no longer productive enough to suit the breeder's standards, they

will be culled from the rabbitry. The fate of many of the rabbits culled from the rabbitry will be slaughter (for human consumption); others may be sold as food for reptiles or other animals.” Cheryl Kucsera, The Monaco House Rabbit Sanctuary

Where to begin with the above, so much is just so very very wrong! The only factual information is pretty much the first line, yes Virginia where one breeds rabbits is called a rabbitry. The part about a rabbitry resembling a “battery hen operation”, propaganda meant to bash breeders. Yes rabbits are kept in cages this is to protect them from fighting which rabbits do and from continually breeding. Most hobby breeders use stacked cages. Battery hen cages is an issue animal rights fanatics have campaigned against. I’m no chicken farmer but before taking anything as truth from those opposed to eating animal products I’d talk to a chicken farmer about the whys behind caging hens. But caging rabbits is important in order to protect them and not have continual breeding. Or, would the rabbit rightist rather we just allow the rabbits to run around free creating litter after litter nobody knowing who the father is?

The bit about wire cages causing sore hocks, not true. Ironically, and you can find the references all over the net, rabbits kept on solid floors can develop sore hocks and free range house rabbits have been reported to develop sore hocks. The rabbits do fine on wire and it’s very sanitary as waste falls through, they do not have to sit in it like rescue mills who only provide a litter box and then encourage the rabbit to eat hay while sitting in it’s litterbox. The rabbit’s feet are well padded providing protection from the wire. Sore hocks is a problem involving genetic predisposition as well as allowing a rabbit to sit in dirty and moist conditions. Broken toes can happen, but not often, how about all the pet rabbits who end up with broken bones running free range?

Rabbits living singly, yes because rabbits will fight or breed if they aren’t kept separated. I recall a news article where a rabbit “rescuer” was being interviewed and a fight broke out among her rabbits who were allowed to all run around together. So is fighting and being attacked kinder than keeping them separated?

As far as bred repeatedly, rabbits are induced ovulators so the act of mating releases eggs, one doesn’t have to wait for them to have a “season”. In addition rabbits have a short breeding lifespan so yes they do get bred several times a year but this is natural for them and does not put their welfare in jeopardy. To suggest they are bred “repeatedly” is just more propaganda. Like we get told about how the evil “pupymillers” breed dogs “every time they come into heat”, yeah but on further reflection they come into heat twice a year, so if they are bred twice a year what’s the big deal?

Finally she uses culling incorrectly. For rabbit fanatics to cull means to kill, but that is incorrect. The real definition of culling is to remove a rabbit from one’s breeding program. The cull is then offered for sale as breeding or show stock, as a pet, and yes as food. But what is so wrong with that? It is a responsible outlet for an animal. If pet owners don’t want to see retired breeding stock used as food perhaps more pet owners should consider purchasing an adult as a pet.

From a Letter regarding show breeder confiscation case posted on an HR\$ website author is Brown DVM and a member of HR\$:

“ I do not believe that this was a "rabbit mill" strictly for the purpose of breeding rabbits for sale to pet stores. The animals examined were of high quality and many were show quality. He did not have multiple rabbits that were pregnant at the time of seizure which would have indicated he was only in it for mass production of rabbits.”

What is so disturbing to me about the above is this is a veterinarian, boy talk about a bias!!!! So if someone has multiple rabbits pregnant to her that means it’s a “mill”? Most breeders including hobby breeders and show breeders will breed does in groups that way if you need to foster babies you can. Having multiple does pregnant at any given time is NOT a sign of abuse, irresponsibility, or one being a “mill”. And first line, apparently breeding to sell to a pet store makes a breeder a “mill” in the eyes of

this vet. Sad. But you know what I want you to think about, does this veterinarian charge people for seeing and treating their pets? If that's okay to do that then why would breeding to sell to a pet store to satisfy pet owner demand be a bad thing or a "mill"?

So next time you read about "rabbit mills" just remember most of it is inaccurate and only meant to turn people against all breeders.

Copyright 2009 Rabbit Education Society