RESPONSIBLE
SOURCING

Production process

RABBITS

RSPCA

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RESPONSIBLE SOURCING

Animal welfare considerations

- Cage systems
- Catching, handling and slaughter method
- Lack of choice to socialise, withdraw or hide
- Lack of enrichment
- Lack of space

Definitions

Kit – young recently born rabbit.

Meat rabbit – rabbit grown for meat.

Doe – breeding female rabbit.

Buck – breeding male rabbit.

Rabbits bred and grown for meat are generally housed in intensive systems in wire mesh cages that are suspended above the floor. Cages may be placed in single tiers in rows within a shed, or may consist of various tiers (i.e. cages placed on top of each other) with droppings diverted away from lower cages. In these cages, young rabbits (up to 12 weeks of age) can be housed in groups in a floor area of only 700 cm2 (slightly bigger than an A4 piece of paper) per rabbit. Adult breeding does and bucks are housed individually and have only 560cm2 (smaller than an A4 piece of paper) each.

At around 16 weeks of age, does are ready for mating (bucks are a few weeks older before being ready for mating). Mating often occurs through artificial insemination rather than natural mating. After 32 days of gestation (pregnancy), does will give birth to a litter of 'kittens' (eight or more) and will typically produce eight litters a year. Does are given a nest box with bedding/nesting material around 3 days before 'kindling' (giving birth). The doe will usually pluck her own fur to add to the nesting material. Not all kittens survive to weaning (~30% mortality) which occurs at 4-5 weeks of age. The breeding doe's productive life is ~15 months, for the buck it is ~2 years. Once weaned, young rabbits are moved to a grow-out cage and raised to 11-13 weeks of age (~3kg weight) at which stage they are ready for slaughter. At this point, they are caught and placed into transport crates and taken to the abattoir or slaughtered on site. Rabbits are stunned manually by holding the rabbit and guiding their head into electrical stunning tongs. Once stunned, the rabbit is shackled, the major blood vessels are severed (neck cut) and then bled out and further processed. Transport and slaughter may result in a number of welfare concerns including long periods of food and water deprivation, rough handling, or ineffective stunning or neck cut causing pain, fear and distress.

There are numerous welfare concerns with rabbit farming in intensive systems. For all rabbits, cage systems and their lack of space prevent expression of key natural behaviours including hopping, running, hiding and lying comfortably, resulting in abnormal behaviours (stereotypies) and fear of humans. For breeding does, welfare concerns include problems with resting, heat stress, restricted movement and inability to express positive social behaviour, skin lesions, and inability to gnaw. For kittens, hunger is a key issue as well as neonatal disorders, heat and cold stress, and inability to gnaw. For growing rabbits, welfare concerns include problems with resting and inability to express positive social behaviour, gastroenteric disorders, skin disorders (e.g. ringworm), hunger, fear and inability to gnaw.

Growing rabbits may be hungry due to feed restriction, breeding does may be fed a restricted diet to ensure they are an appropriate weight for mating, and kittens may have feed restricted immediately after weaning to manage digestive problems. Digestive problems are a concern for all rabbits, with an unbalanced diet being identified as one of the causes. Breeding animals in wire cages may suffer from sore hocks (ankles) or ulcerating and inflamed footpads. Skin lesions such a scratches or open wounds may be caused by damaged or unsuitable housing equipment or by aggression from cage mates. Adequate temperature and ventilation control in sheds is important to avoid heat or cold stress.

Behaviour of domestic rabbits is similar to behaviour exhibited in the wild. For example, in the wild, rabbits can be seen hopping, jumping and running as well as playing. In cage systems, due to lack of space, there is little to no opportunity to carry out these behaviours which leads to frustration. Cage height is too low to allow rabbits to fully stretch upwards or sometimes even to sit with their ears erect. When resting and fully relaxed, rabbits will lie on their side with legs outstretched but may suffer from physical discomfort when unable to do so. The uncomfortable wire floor discourages appropriate resting. Breeding does' normal maternal behaviour consists of nest building, kindling and nursing. In cage systems, does may not be provided with a sufficiently large nest or enough nesting material. Does will generally nurse their kittens once a day, however in rabbit farming systems, does do not have the choice to remove themselves from their litter.

Social isolation of farmed breeding rabbits (except does with kits) means these normally gregarious animals cannot express positive social interactions such as bodily contact and sniffing or grooming one another. However, individual housing does avoid the negative impacts of aggression and fighting which is also seen in wild rabbits. High stocking density also reduces the ability to express social behaviour in growing rabbits.

Chewing and gnawing are key behavioural needs of rabbits and form part of their exploratory behaviours. A lack of gnawing material, such as roughage or wood, in rabbit farming systems results in redirection of that behaviour towards the cage as well as other rabbits.

Rabbits are naturally vigilant and will exhibit fear responses such as running away, freezing or attacking. Rabbits living in social isolation or with reduced human contact are more fearful of humans than those who have some form of positive contact. Overcrowding can induce fear mainly due to competition for resources and aggression from other rabbits. Cages provide the rabbit with no means of withdrawing or hiding.

Farmed rabbits may be subject to painful procedures including ear tagging or tattooing of breeding does and injections or artificial insemination. The level of pain may be significant if operators are not competent in using the most humane methods.

In short, rabbits housed in barren highly confined environments such as cages, do not have the opportunity to exercise adequately, rest properly or perform their natural behaviours, leading to poor physical and mental wellbeing. Alternative non-cage systems, either indoor or outdoor, could have the potential to provide for better rabbit welfare.

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