



Submission

Draft Code of Welfare (Rabbits) 2021



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Introduction

Please note: This is a draft Code of Welfare submitted to NAWAC for consideration. This document has not been issued by the Minister for Agriculture and is not a current Code of Welfare under the Animal Welfare Act.

Codes of welfare are developed by the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC). Under section 70 of the Animal Welfare Act 1999 (the Act), the Minister, NAWAC, or any other person may prepare a draft code of welfare. If a specific industry or organisation believes a new code, or an updated code, is needed, they can invest their own resources to develop a draft code before sending it to NAWAC for consideration.

Please note that as such, this draft code released by SPCA is a revised version submitted to NAWAC after initial review by NAWAC.

This introduction is not part of the Code of Welfare but is intended to indicate its general effect.

Purpose

Owners and persons in charge of rabbits have a responsibility to understand and meet the welfare needs of their rabbits. The purpose of this code is to provide guidance to the owners of rabbits and persons who are in charge of rabbits about the standards they must achieve to meet their obligations under the [Animal Welfare Act 1999](#).

The code sets minimum standards for the care and management of rabbits. It also includes recommendations for best practices to encourage the adoption of the highest possible standards of husbandry, care, and handling. Advice is given to encourage the provision of a high level of care and good welfare. Explanatory material is provided where appropriate.

Background

The [Animal Welfare Act 1999](#) (“the Act”) provides for the welfare of animals in New Zealand. It puts obligations on people who own or are in charge of animals to provide for the welfare of their animals.

The Act establishes the fundamental obligations relating to the care of animals and provides for the development and issue of codes of welfare.

Codes of welfare expand on the basic obligations of the Act by setting minimum standards and recommending best practices for the care and management of animals.



Who should read this code of welfare?

This code of welfare is intended for all persons responsible for the welfare of domesticated rabbits, including those kept as companions, for breeding, farming, or any other purpose. Under [Part 6 of the Animal Welfare Act 1999](#), persons in charge of rabbits used in research, testing, and teaching are not subjected to the minimum standards or best practices in this code of welfare. However, we recommend persons in charge of rabbits used in research, testing, and teaching use this document for guidance.

Under the Act, the “owner” and every “person in charge” of an animal are responsible for meeting the legal obligations for the welfare of animals under their care.

For rabbits, the owner of the animals may place them in the care of others who become the persons in charge, but this does not derogate from their responsibility to ensure that the requirements of the Act are met.

Responsibility for meeting minimum standards relating to the provision, design and maintenance of the facilities and equipment, the allocation of operational responsibilities and the competence and supervision of the performance of employees will lie with the owner and person in charge of the animals.

Responsibility for meeting minimum standards during the operation of tasks will lie with the person responsible for carrying out that task. That person is “in charge” of the animals at that point in time. The identification of the person in charge will depend on the minimum standard in question.

Why is this important?

Failure to meet a minimum standard in this code may be used as evidence to support a prosecution for an offence under the Animal Welfare Act. A person who is charged with an offence against the Animal Welfare Act can defend themselves by showing that they have equalled or exceeded the minimum standards in this code.

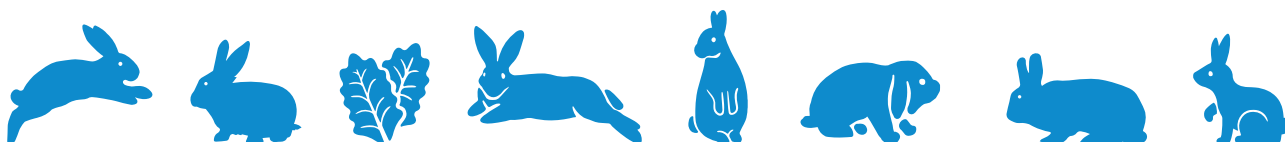
Owners and persons in charge of animals are not required to comply with the recommendations for best practice in this Code but are encouraged to do so to provide higher standards of welfare.

Some codes of welfare include example indicators for each minimum standard. The list of indicators is not exhaustive but is given to provide guidance on ways in which a minimum standard may be met.

The National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) considers that the minimum standards and recommendations for best practices are generally applicable across all rabbits in all situations. The way in which a minimum standard is achieved, however, may depend on the context in which it is being considered.

Legislative background

This code does not provide an exhaustive list of the Act’s requirements, and owners and those in charge of animals should note that they must comply with the minimum standards in this code and in the general provisions of the Act. A copy of the Act is accessible at: www.legislation.govt.nz.



Other information

Other codes of welfare in existence provide minimum standards and recommendations for best practices in particular circumstances, such as temporary housing and transport. Other codes of welfare should be consulted where appropriate (see www.mpi.govt.nz). The [Animal Welfare Act 1999 Part 6](#) provides further requirements for rabbits used in research, testing, and teaching.

Codes of welfare must be accompanied by a report that sets out the deliberations that the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) undertook when developing the codes of welfare including the standards and recommendations for best practice, the nature of any significant differences of opinion during drafting and consultation, and any matters that should be dealt with by regulation. Code reports can be accessed online (see www.mpi.govt.nz).

Although efforts to include relevant regulations within this code have been made, there may be other regulations that are relevant to you. The full list of all animal welfare regulations should be consulted where appropriate (see www.legislation.govt.nz).



PART 1: General Requirements



1.1 Application

This code applies to all persons responsible for a rabbit, including rabbit breeders, those who show, sell, or rehome rabbits, those who keep rabbits for their meat or fur (farming) or as companions (pets), and those who use rabbits for any other reason.

Wild rabbits are not included under the provisions of this code. Wild rabbits are defined as pests under the [Biosecurity Act 1993](#) and therefore may be subject to control under a pest management strategy.

1.2 Interpretation and Definitions

Refer to [Appendix I – Interpretation and Definitions](#).

PART 2: Rabbit Ownership



Introduction

Rabbits are a popular companion animal in New Zealand. However, a rabbit's welfare can be adversely affected if they are not well managed and provided proper care. Rabbits are also reared for their meat and fur in New Zealand, and it is important to ensure that the welfare of these animals is also met.

2.1 Purchasing or Adopting a Rabbit

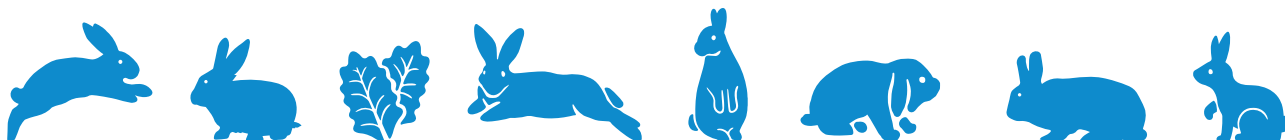
Introduction

Domesticated rabbits can be acquired from different sources in New Zealand, with the main providers being rabbit breeders and commercial pet shops. Rabbits can also be adopted from animal welfare shelters.

People intending to keep rabbits need to consider the initial and ongoing needs of rabbits including suitable housing, an area suitable for exercise, as well as the time and financial investment associated with responsible rabbit ownership.

Recommended Best Practice

- a) Before acquiring a rabbit, intending owners should be familiar with the responsibilities of ownership and the welfare needs of rabbits, and be prepared to undertake those responsibilities for the life of the rabbit (around 7-12 years depending on breed), including the need for companionship with another rabbit.



- b) When acquiring a rabbit, the new owner should be provided with information about:
- > Settling the rabbit into its new environment;
 - > Feeding requirements from kitten to adulthood;
 - > Ongoing care;
 - > Rabbit behaviour and welfare needs, including the need for companionship with another rabbit;
 - > Vaccinations, dental health, and parasite treatments;
 - > Current feeding regime, (along with one- or two-day supply of food including hay), and an understanding of the importance of making only gradual changes to the diet.
 - > Always providing fresh hay to meet the physical, behavioural, and health needs of rabbits.
 - > Housing, which should be large enough to ensure each rabbit has sufficient space to move around, is provided protection from environmental stressors and has access to appropriate areas for sleeping, eating, and exercising.
- c) Rabbits and guinea pigs should not be housed together as they can easily cause injury to each other (which may be fatal), have different dietary requirements, and are not compatible companions. In addition, rabbits can carry bacteria (*Pasteurella*) that is lethal to guinea pigs.
- d) The rabbit's previous diet should be continued initially, as a change of diet can result in stomach upsets. Any change in the diet should be introduced gradually.
- e) Parents/guardians/teachers should teach young children in their care how to properly handle a rabbit so that both rabbit and child are secure and not harmed.

General Information

Rabbits are naturally both curious and cautious. They enjoy investigating new surroundings, but may initially be fearful of new sights, smells, and sounds. Rabbits should be introduced to their new surroundings with care.

Rabbits will need secure housing that should contain an exercise area for inside rabbits, a run for outdoor or farmed rabbits, and a darkened sleeping area. When opening the enclosure door or handling the rabbit outside of the enclosure, the area should be well-secured to prevent escape. Rabbits who are particularly fearful may display nervous or aggressive tendencies towards humans, in which case, it is recommended that thick gloves are worn during handling. When rabbits are picked up, their back legs should be gently secured against their body to ensure that they feel safe and do not kick out.

Rabbits are social animals and should be housed together with at least one companion of its own species as long as they are compatible. When housed alone, rabbits may become bored, depressed and/or stressed, and in some cases, they may become destructive and hyperactive. Stress can contribute to health problems such as gut stasis and other illnesses. Rabbits form a bond for life so, where possible, they should not be separated for extended periods once bonded. Separation of a bonded pair for extended periods may require a safe re-introduction process.

If housed in pairs, desexed rabbits of opposite sexes are more likely to make the best companions as they are considered to maintain a more stable bond than same-sex pairs. Male rabbits can be fertile for four to six weeks post-castration. Rabbits of opposite sexes should be housed together six weeks after both are desexed.



Pairs of same-sex rabbits can lead to territorial fighting and death, especially for males. Fighting should be considered a serious problem between companion rabbits. Fighting between young pairs can occur as they age, therefore, it is recommended they are desexed at the same time before they mature.

All other animals, especially those who are natural predators of rabbits, should always be kept away from the area where the rabbits' cage is located.

2.2 Introducing New Rabbits

Introduction

Rabbits are territorial, so it is important for rabbits who are unfamiliar with one another to be gradually introduced. Gradual introductions may take several days; so, patience is required to ensure rabbit safety.

Where introductions are not properly carried out, fighting can result, with juveniles and senior rabbits at particular risk of sustaining injury or death. If early problems of confrontation occur, it is important to keep the rabbits separated with a more gradual introduction while keeping the animals within sight and scent of each other. Rabbits that show affiliative behaviours can be introduced more quickly, whereas rabbits showing neutral or aggressive behaviours will need more time before they are allowed together.

General Information

The following procedure is recommended to introduce rabbits who are new to one another:

- (a) Place the rabbits into separate neutral areas with a fine-mesh wire fence between them, making sure the rabbits are not able to bite each other through the fence. Neutral areas are spaces that any resident rabbit has not already established as his/her territory. The neutral area must be safe for the rabbits and cleared of any potentially dangerous items such as electrical cords or chemicals.
- (b) The rabbits will be able to smell and investigate each other through the wire fence but cannot harm one another.
- (c) Continue to regularly allow the rabbits to get used to each other's presence until they do not show aggressive behaviour. Continue to monitor rabbits who show neutral behaviour signs towards each other; this could indicate they have not yet established their relationship and may be aggressive at a later point.
- (d) If the rabbits begin to show affectionate behaviour towards each other, the introduction process can be shortened, and the fence can be removed for closely supervised direct interaction. If there are any signs of aggression, the fence must be replaced and the initial introduction process should be restarted.

If the intention is for the rabbits not to reproduce, then it is essential for one or both rabbits to be desexed.

2.3 Relinquishing (Changing) Ownership

Introduction

While ownership of a companion rabbit should be undertaken as a commitment for the entire life of that animal, sometimes it becomes necessary to relinquish ownership, such as following changes in financial or family circumstances or relocation.



General Information

Potential ways to find a new owner include contacting the original breeder, placing advertisements in social media, newspapers, notice boards and with reputable animal welfare shelters, or rehoming to a family member or friend. Care should be taken to ensure that the new owner is prepared to undertake the commitment of ownership for the life of the animal.

It is an offence under the [Animal Welfare Act 1999](#) to desert an animal in circumstances in which no provision is made to meet its physical, health, and behavioural needs. Owners looking at relinquishing ownership of their rabbit should make efforts to rehome the animal themselves. If a suitable alternative owner cannot be found, the owner should discuss relinquishment with their local animal shelter.

PART 3: Food and Water



3.1 Food and Feeding

Introduction

Food and nutrient requirements of rabbits vary widely. Factors to be considered include the rabbit (i.e., its age, sex, size, state of health, growth rate, level of activity and exercise, and physiological state), and the food (i.e., its nutritional composition, quality, frequency of feeding, and whether it is a new food for the rabbit).

Rabbits need a balanced daily diet in quantities that meet their requirements for health and welfare and to maintain their ideal body weight. Rabbits are herbivores and need a plant-based diet with a high fibre intake. While good quality, balanced commercial rabbit food can be purchased, this must be supplemental to a diet primarily of high-quality hay or grass and fresh leafy greens. Leafy greens such as spinach, cabbage, and kale should be offered sparingly or not at all. Pelleted or extruded feeds are preferred and more nutritionally complete per diet item than grain mixes because different diet items in the mix have different nutritional compositions. Hay and grass should form 85 % of a rabbit's diet, 10 % should be a variety of leafy greens, vegetables, and herbs, and 5 % pellet feed specifically designed for rabbits.



1. Minimum Standard – Food and Feeding

- a. Rabbits must receive adequate quantities of nutritious food to enable each rabbit to:*
- > Maintain good health;*
 - > Meet their physiological demands, including those resulting from the level of physical activity, growth, pregnancy, lactation, and exposure to cold; and*
 - > Avoid metabolic and nutritional disorders.*
- b. Fresh hay must always be available to promote the physical, health, and behavioural needs of rabbits.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 1- Food and Feeding

- Nutritionally balanced diets appropriate for the age and physiological status of the animals held within the home or facility are available
- Rabbits are given sufficient daily feed to maintain appropriate body condition
- Faeces appearance is "normal" i.e. no evidence of diarrhoea, constipation, blood etc.
- Food is stored appropriately, with dry food in a rodent-proof container and perishable food (i.e. meat) in a refrigerator
- Food is free from harmful objects that could cause intestinal problems (e.g. plastic, metal, wool)
- Presence of fresh hay in the rabbit's living area
- If a rabbit is not eating, steps are taken to remedy the problem
- In commercial facilities, staff understand and ensure that they quickly identify, seek advice on and remedy any nutritional deficiencies and metabolic diseases
- In commercial facilities, records of monitoring of body weights or body condition scores are documented

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Rabbits should be fed a diet appropriate for their life stage and circumstances. A veterinarian should be consulted for a list of rabbit diet items.
- (b) Rabbits should be fed an appropriate diet to maintain optimum body weight and health. Where disease is present in a rabbit, special attention to diet may be required. If there is any doubt concerning feeding or health, advice should be sought from a veterinarian or other person who is experienced in the management and feeding of rabbits.
- (c) Rabbits should be provided a diet consisting primarily of fibre and all pet rabbits should be checked routinely for dental abnormalities that could lead to dental disease even in cases where dental disease is not suspected.
- (d) Where a rabbit's body weight and condition score (refer to [Appendix II: Assessment of Body Condition of Rabbits](#)) do not meet the norm for the breed, including where a rabbit is overweight, expert advice should be obtained about a weight management programme.
- (e) Prescription diets for certain medical conditions should be fed as instructed by a veterinarian or other experienced and competent person.



General Information

Provision of ad libitum hay as a forage cannot be overstated as important for rabbit health and welfare due to multiple benefits including:

- It is ideal for the provision of nutritionally balanced feed;
- Rabbits are kept more occupied with consuming hay as it is less energy-dense and requires longer feed times;
- Can be enriching;
- Reduces wounding of cage mates, excessive grooming, and fur-chewing, which also benefits the digestive system;
- Reduces risk of obesity
- Aids appropriate tooth wear
- Reduces chewing on other objects such as bedding; and
- Promotes urinary tract health through association with increased water intake.

Hay is vital to a rabbit's health and digestive system, as it provides fibre and helps to wear down their teeth. Fresh hay should always be available. Damp, mouldy, or dusty hay must never be given due to the health problems that arise. Grass or other fresh greens given to rabbits must not have been sprayed with herbicides, fungicides, or antisprouting agents. Mown grass should not be provided to rabbits because it ferments rapidly and there are risks of transmitting parasites or viral haemorrhagic disease.

Many vegetables and fruits commonly fed to rabbits are detrimental to gut health and contribute to obesity. Ensure vegetables, herbs or garden greens provided to rabbits are safe for them to consume, as some can be poisonous. Carrots and fruit should only be provided in small amounts as treats, as rabbits do not naturally eat root vegetables or fruit in the wild. Caution should be taken when feeding new foods to rabbits, particularly to juvenile rabbits of under 18 weeks. New food should be gradually introduced to minimise the risk of diarrhoea. Juvenile rabbits of under 12 weeks have particularly sensitive stomachs, so additional caution should be taken for young animals. Adult rabbit foods can be introduced from 4-6 months of age.

Pellets that contain dried fruits, nuts, grains, and coloured parts made from fat, sugar and salt should not be provided as they can cause intestinal blockages. Only a small portion of the diet should consist of suitable pellets. It is recommended that any pellets fed have a fibre content greater than 18 %, and less protein than fibre. Follow the feeding instructions on the packaging to know the adequate daily provision of pellets. Growing, pregnant, nursing, and underweight rabbits may require larger amounts of pellets and additional hay

Rabbits should never be given food produced for humans, such as bread, rice, potatoes, biscuits, chocolate, and other sweets. These can cause serious digestive problems. Rabbits should also never be given any type of nuts or beans.

Be sure to check the ingredients list before purchasing commercial rabbit treats. Seed and grain-based treats and yoghurt drops should be avoided, as these are high in fat and rabbits tend to show a high sensitivity to such items. Unless fully natural, most commercially sold rabbit treats should be avoided, as these contain sugar, dairy, artificial colouring and/or are too high in carbohydrates. It is recommended to stick to fresh vegetables, and rabbit-safe tree or shrub branches when considering rabbit treats.



Food is passed through a rabbit's gut and is eliminated in two types of droppings:

- (a) round, fibrous 'pills', and
- (b) caecotrophs which are 'grape-like' bunches.

Caecotrophs are re-ingested by rabbits to ensure that the nutrients are not wasted and to maintain their gut flora. Consumption of caecotrophs can be indicative of nutritional balance; when caecotrophs are not consumed completely, then the diet should be assessed and adjusted. Caecotrophs that are uneaten and soft can be related to diet problems, health issues, pain associated with ingestion, physical inability to reach or groom the perineum, and factors such as coat type, stress, or change in routine.

Rabbits in meat production systems should not be subjected to a restricted feed regime where the rabbit's welfare is compromised. Group-housed growing rabbits will show increased competition for feed and water and other agonistic behaviours, and restricted diets for pregnant does can lead to hunger and developmental problems for her foetuses.

3.2 Body Condition

Introduction

A healthy rabbit should have bright eyes, a clean and dense coat, a well-proportioned and muscled body, and no protruding spine or pelvic bones. Ribs should be palpable (able to be touched or felt), but with a light fat covering. The abdominal fat pad should be minimal; excessive fat here indicates obesity, which can contribute to disease.

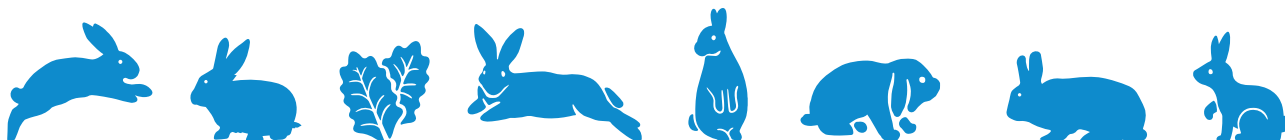
A body condition scoring description is provided in [Appendix II: Assessment of Body Condition of Rabbits](#).

2. Minimum Standard – Body Condition

- a. If a rabbit is exhibiting a body condition score "thin" (as defined in [Appendix II: Assessment of Body Condition of Rabbits in this code](#)) appropriate remedial action through veterinary attention or improved nutrition must be taken.*
- b. If a rabbit is exhibiting a body condition score "very thin" (as defined in [Appendix II: Assessment of Body Condition of Rabbits in this code](#)) immediate veterinary attention must be sought.*
- c. If a rabbit is exhibiting a body condition score of "obese" (as defined in [Appendix II: Assessment of Body Condition of Rabbits in this code](#)), veterinary advice must be sought, and remedial action taken to decrease their body weight using dietary modification and environmental improvements to allow for increased energy expenditure.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 2- Body Condition

- Rabbits are given sufficient daily feed to maintain appropriate body condition
- Rabbits are at a body condition score of three, "ideal"



- Any rabbits not at an ideal body condition score are receiving remedial action through improved nutrition, husbandry practice and/or veterinary attention

Recommended Best Practice

A rabbit's body condition score should be maintained at "ideal" as defined in [Appendix II: Assessment of Body Condition of Rabbits](#).

If a rabbit is "overweight" according to [Appendix II: Assessment of Body Condition of Rabbits](#) in this code, appropriate remedial action should be taken to decrease their body weight using dietary modification, along with improving the rabbit's exposure to an appropriate environment for it to increase their energy expenditure.

General Information

Obese rabbits face serious health risks such as gastrointestinal problems including gut stasis, diarrhoea, and cessation of caecotrophy; renal, dental, and heart disease; liver disorders; hyperthermia; urine scalding; cystitis; fly strike; and pododermatitis. Excessive weight can also damage joints, reduce mobility, and exacerbate arthritis. Obesity also increases risks to the rabbit under anaesthesia and during pregnancy. The rabbits' life expectancy will also significantly reduce.

Body condition scoring should be performed using both visual and hands-on assessments. The body condition of rabbits cannot be assessed by simple visual observation – the extent of fat deposits can only be accurately assessed by feeling the tissues over the rabbit's ribs, backbone, pelvis, and abdomen.

3.3 Water

Introduction

Water is an essential daily requirement for the proper functioning of the whole body. Therefore, good quality water should always be available for all rabbits.

3. Minimum Standard – Water

- a. *Rabbits must have continuous access to water that is palatable, not harmful to health and available in quantities sufficient to maintain vital bodily functions.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 3- Water

- Palatable water is available at all times within enclosures
- Rabbits do not show signs of dehydration
- Water bowls/troughs are clean
- For commercial facilities, water that is not from a domestic supply is tested for contaminants



Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Water should be provided either:
 - > in bottles specifically designed for use by small animals (however, the spout of bottles can easily get clogged and will freeze in very cold weather if your rabbits live outside); or
 - > in heavy-based ceramic bowls, which are not as easily tipped over (lapping from a bowl is more natural to rabbits, however, they are more easily spilled or knocked over, so should be regularly checked).
- (b) It is ideal for two different sources of water to be provided in case of one source failing (e.g., in case water bottles leak, water containers are tipped over or the water dirtied, or if the ball in the bottle's spout gets stuck).
- (c) The quantity, quality and availability of water should be checked twice daily.
- (d) Care should be taken to ensure that water for outdoor rabbits does not freeze in very cold weather.

General Information

Good quality water should always be available for all rabbits. Rabbits prefer and consume more water when offered in open dishes compared to nipple drinkers. The water intake of rabbits will vary between individual rabbits and can depend on weather conditions (especially temperature), lactation and health issues. Lack of water can cause a rabbit to become seriously ill. Dehydration can become a serious problem for rabbits when diarrhoea or other medical conditions occur, as this causes excessive fluid loss from the body; veterinary advice should be sought in such circumstances. Rabbits who exhibit an increase in thirst (with no change in air temperature or humidity) may be showing the signs of a health problem and may also require veterinary attention.

PART 4: Containment and Housing



Introduction

Depending on the climate, healthy rabbits can be housed indoors or outdoors. Wherever they are situated, to meet their physical needs they require access to shelter that provides warmth and is free from draughts and excessive heat or cold. They also need a dry bed and darkened sleeping space, with sufficient space for each rabbit to move around. Rabbits prefer larger cages without footrest; CF: cage similar to the CN but with plastic footrest; ECWP: enlarged cage with wire-mesh platform; and ECPP: extra enlarged cage with plastic-mesh platform. All does were inseminated on the same day, 11 days after kindlings. Reproductive performance was evaluated during the first five consecutive kindlings. Severity of sore hocks was scored at each insemination. Location preference of the does and the platform usage of their kits were evaluated. Kindling rate, litter size (total born, born alive, alive at 21 and 35 days) and a total surface area that allows rabbits to express locomotion behaviours are important for their welfare.



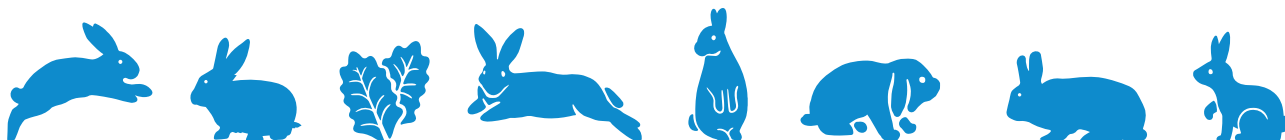
Rabbits need to be appropriately contained to prevent them from escaping, harming themselves or damaging the environment. The size and type of containment or housing used can have a significant impact on the rabbits' welfare. The ability to exercise and fulfil their behavioural needs must be considered, along with the necessity for rabbits to be protected from exposure to extreme temperatures.

4. Minimum Standard – Containment and Housing

- a. Rabbits must not be contained in a way or within an environment that causes them injury or distress.*
- b. The housing must be of a height that allows the rabbits to stand up fully on their hind legs and of a length that allows the rabbits to hop at least three full body hops (3 full displacements of the rabbit's body).*
- c. Rabbit housing, including wire cages, must provide solid surfaces on which they can rest, move, feed, and nest.*
- d. When rabbits are located outside, sufficient shelter and shade must be provided to protect the rabbits from the weather conditions including:*
 - > sufficient shade from the sun in hot temperatures;*
 - > weatherproof shelter during cold, wet, windy, or otherwise unpleasant conditions.*
- e. Rabbits must be situated in an environment that is of a suitable temperature which is not likely to cause heat or cold stress.*
- f. Rabbits must be provided with permanent access to sheltered, dry, and darkened sleeping quarters.*
- g. Rabbits must always be provided with suitable and sufficient bedding material.*
 - > Rabbits must not be required to sleep on concrete or metal surfaces.*
- h. Rabbits must be able exercise daily sufficient to maintain their health and well-being.*
- i. Enclosures must be predator-proof to prevent predators such as dogs, cats, ferrets, or stoats from harming the rabbits.*
- j. All reasonable precautions must be taken by owners to contain their rabbits to their property.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 4- Containment and Housing

- Facilities are designed and managed so that rabbits can move about freely and carry out normal behaviours
- An area for exercise is available
- Solid surfaces are available where the rabbits rest, eat, nest, and move around the cage
- Normal free movement and access to feed and water are not impeded by space restrictions or excessive competition
- Housing provides appropriate means for rabbits to meet their needs, including the ability to stand and hop three body lengths
- Species-appropriate enrichment toys are provided
- The housing area is consistently maintained between 10-22°C
- A rabbit companion is available to provide body warmth



- A draught-free bedding and nesting area for shelter and sleeping is provided
- Enclosures are protected from excessive light at night, even if it is generated from outside the premises
- Rabbits can withdraw to an appropriate sleeping area to sleep for the time required for that species
- There are no injuries or deaths through housing aggressive individuals or species together
- Rabbit enclosures have solid surfaces for resting or standing near their food trays or bowls
- There are no hazards and no equipment upon which rabbits may injure themselves in areas to which they have access
- Fencing is fixed to the ground and is of an appropriate height that rabbits cannot hop over or under it
- For commercial facilities, all rabbits can be inspected with ease, with minimal handling to reduce stress (i.e. there is good access to all rabbits and sufficient lighting)
- For commercial facilities, provisions are in place to control disease entering the facilities

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) A rabbit hutch or cage should be at least 3 metres long by 2 metres wide, and at least 1 metre high for a compatible pair of small to medium sized rabbits.
- (b) Housing should be high enough to enable housed/caged rabbits to hop and to stand on their back legs without their ears touching the top of the enclosure.
- (c) Sleeping areas for a pair of small rabbits should be 1 x 1m (L x W) and at least 0.75m high (or 1.25m if open above). The sleeping space should be big enough to allow both rabbits to stretch out on their sides. Sleeping areas should be sectioned off to some degree as they need to be darker and contain materials for them to nest within as this aims to replicate the natural burrow environment.
- (d) Hutches or cages should be permanently connected to a run to provide the rabbit with an additional space in which to exercise.
- (e) Artificial shade and shelter should be provided where no natural shade and shelter exists.

Rabbits should be provided with a raised, waterproof sleeping area with appropriate bedding material for nesting and warmth.

General Information

Containment within an area or house that is too small, or which contains insufficient space to exercise or enrichment to explore, can have a significant negative impact on the physical and mental health of rabbits. Rabbits confined long-term in an unsuitable environment with minimal provision for adequate exercise can be at risk of suffering from ill health, depression, and behaviour problems.

Wherever they are housed, rabbits need to have access to a secure environment in which they can exercise and explore. Rabbits kept outdoors should be confined within well-ventilated housing such as a rabbit hutch with a run. Rabbits can also be trained to use litter boxes and can be kept as indoor companion animals. In these situations, the areas that are accessible to a rabbit must be rabbit-proofed to prevent chewing of electrical cords and consumption of potted plants.

Exercise is extremely important for the physical and mental health of rabbits, particularly if they are usually kept confined with limited space. Insufficient exercise can contribute to the development of



behaviour problems. Exercise requirements vary with age, breed, and individual circumstances. Older rabbits may exercise less relatively, but physical activity will remain important for both health and mental stimulation. Rabbits like to climb; so, boxes, tree stumps or ramps using materials such as straw bales and untreated wooden crates are recommended. In general, the following considerations can help with hutch, cage, or run design:

- Wire-bottomed enclosures should not be used as these can cause the rabbits feet injuries and sore hocks.
- Toxic materials, such as lead-based paint, cause a risk of poisoning and should not be used.
- Metal hutches or enclosures with a metal or plastic roofs can become extremely hot in warm weather and are not advised.
- Where enclosures are made of wood, the floor should not be slatted with gaps to prevent injuries.

The rabbit's sleeping area should contain appropriate bedding, such as a good covering of soft straw or hay, for nesting and warmth. The sleeping areas should be sectioned off to contain the bedding material and to provide a darkened environment similar to a burrow. Treated timber and wood shavings can be dangerous for rabbits and should not be used as a bedding material.

Rabbits are a prey species, so need to be able to hide in secure places, away from things that scare them. Providing items for rabbits to hide in can help to make them feel safe. Suitable items include cardboard boxes or carry cages with the door removed; tunnels; untreated wicker baskets; paper bags (remove the handles); or pipes.

Rabbits must be provided with suitable amenities to ensure that they can cope with the temperature and weather conditions. They must be provided with shade during hot weather and sufficient shelter including dry nesting material during cold or wet conditions. Additional insulation covers can be used in extreme weather conditions. Blocks of iced water and cold tiles can also help rabbits to cool down when temperatures rise.

- Signs of heat stress in rabbits include:
- Body stretched out, with feet sprawled apart and limp tail
- Wetness around the nose area
- Eyes half-closed
- Tongue protruding
- Fast, shallow breathing
- Reluctance to move
- Refusal to eat or drink
- Ears hot to touch



PART 5: Sanitation and Enrichment



5.1 Sanitation

Introduction

Good hygiene is important to maintain the health and welfare of rabbits and to minimise disease and distress. Regular renewal of bedding improves hygiene and comfort.

5. Minimum Standard – Sanitation

- a. *Faeces and urine must not be permitted to accumulate to such an extent that they pose a threat to the health or welfare of the rabbit.*
- b. *Rabbits must be able to urinate and defecate away from their sleeping area.*
- c. *Ventilation must be provided to maintain hygiene and prevent heat stress.*
- d. *Food and water containers must be kept clean, and free of contamination that may pose a threat to the health or welfare of the rabbit.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 5- Sanitation

- Areas in which rabbits are housed and exercised are clean
- Rabbits are clean, their fur is free of waste material and they show no signs of skin disorders from lack of hygiene
- Food and water bowls or bottles are clean
- A litter box that is not full of urine and faeces is available and is located away from the rabbit's sleeping area, in a well-ventilated space
- For commercial facilities, hygiene protocols detailing daily cleaning routines including removal of contaminated bedding and waste are clearly documented
- For commercial facilities, protocols for regular washing of bowls and utensils are documented

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Hutches, cages, and runs or other areas where rabbits are kept should be checked daily and the area kept appropriately clean.
- (b) Where present, litter material should be discarded regularly, and litter trays cleaned and disinfected.
- (c) Clay, clumping, or crystal litter material should be avoided as this can harm the rabbit if they ingest this material.
- (d) Bedding should be changed regularly, and soiled bedding should be removed and replaced.



- (e) Where larger and/or changing populations of rabbits are kept, hygiene measures should be of a standard that minimises the risk of cross-infection.
- (f) Ventilation should be controlled to manage dampness and noxious odours.
- (g) Food and water containers should be washed thoroughly on a regular basis to minimise health risks from contamination.

General Information

All surfaces of the hutch, cage, or enclosure, as well as food and water containers and litter trays, should be regularly cleaned. These can be kept clean by scrubbing with hot soapy water, followed by rinsing and disinfection. If commercial cleaners are used these must be safe for rabbits. The frequency in which the enclosure should be cleaned will depend on the size of the area, the number of rabbits housed, and whether they are litter-trained. The hutch or enclosure should not smell strongly of ammonia as this indicates a build-up of urine which can adversely affect a rabbit's health.

Rabbits can be trained to use a litter tray, which will assist in maintaining clean housing. Litter trays can be placed within the cage in the corner most frequently used for toileting to encourage their use. Litter trays should be of adequate size to allow the rabbit to sit comfortably. A litter that will absorb the urine should be placed in the tray. Standard clay, clumping or crystal litter should not be used as clay litter produces a high amount of dust, clumping litter may block the rabbits' digestive tract when ingested, and crystal litter may contain chemicals toxic to rabbits. Sawdust and wood shavings are also not advised as they can irritate the skin and lungs. Paper or wood litter (in pellet form) is the recommended litter type.

The environment should be well-ventilated to assist in preventing dampness and the build-up of noxious odours and to minimise the irritation of the rabbits' respiratory systems.

5.2 Enrichment

Introduction

Rabbits are intelligent and sociable animals who require social and physical enrichment to keep them happy and healthy. Enrichment is the deliberate addition of environmental complexity to an animal's environment and provides opportunities for animals to actively engage with their environment and others. Enrichment helps to prevent boredom and promotes positive physical and mental health. There are different ways to enrich a rabbit's environment, but it should be ensured that any items used are safe, non-toxic, and will not cause injury.

6. Minimum Standard – Enrichment

- a. Rabbits must not be housed in barren cages, hutches, or other enclosures.*
- b. Any enrichment added to a rabbit's environment must be monitored for its effect on rabbit behaviour.*
- c. Any enrichment implemented must not cause injury and/or distress to the rabbit.*
- d. Rabbits must have access to safe materials to chew.*
- e. Harnesses must not be used in a way that causes injury or distress.*



Example Indicators Minimum Standard 6- Enrichment

- Rabbit-safe chewing material (e.g. cardboard tubes filled with hay, branches, seagrass rope, or willow balls) is provided
- Rabbit teeth are worn down so that injury is prevented
- Rabbits are seen interacting with enrichment items provided or evidence of interaction with enrichment items is present e.g. chew marks on toys
- Any enrichment toys provided are made from rabbit-safe material, with no protrusions or abrasive surfaces
- Rabbits are not housed alone
- Any harnesses that are used fit well

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Rabbits should be provided with space, toys, and a complex environment (e.g., tunnels, hideouts and platforms), foraging opportunities and positive social interactions to encourage behavioural diversity.
- (b) Rabbits should be provided sufficient time and freedom to explore and exercise within a safe and enclosed environment.
- (c) Enrichment items should be rotated, and novel items introduced so that they stay interesting to the rabbit and provide environmental variability.
- (d) Rabbits should not be kept on their own without a bonded mate.

General Information

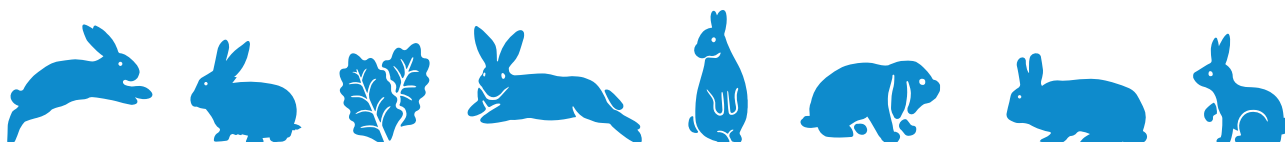
Animals actively engage with their environment to acquire knowledge and enhance skills. This intrinsic ability is most at risk in barren environments. Enrichment can be used to enhance positive experience, by providing rabbits with opportunities to engage in rewarding behaviours. Rather than imposing enrichment upon rabbits, rabbits should be provided choices to better understand their subjective preferences, which can vary between individuals, species, and context.

Rabbits should be given regular opportunities to dig, forage, chew, explore and play. This can be facilitated by providing chewing blocks made of rabbit-safe wood (hardwood), hideouts, tunnels, toys, and interesting food for foraging. Treat balls, paper bags or toilet rolls stuffed with hay and placing food around the enclosure will encourage natural foraging behaviours. Tunnels and hideouts are important for encouraging exercise and providing a substitute burrow. If rabbits do not have access to grass, a larger litter tray or planter filled with earth can be provided to facilitate digging. Toys and furniture should be switched around every now and again to provide rabbits with novelty and variety.

Rabbits are highly social creatures. They require the company of other rabbits for warmth and companionship, and this should occur wherever possible. For more information about introducing new rabbits refer to [Part 2.2](#) of this Code. Human interaction, for example through training or playing with toys, can also be enriching for rabbits. [Part 8](#) of this code deals with other aspects of rabbit behaviour and training.

With regards to all enrichment, it is important to ensure that:

- the enrichment provided is safe and cannot harm the rabbits. Enrichment should be non-toxic, properly installed, and have no small parts that could be swallowed or become a choking hazard.



- the rabbits have the choice of approaching or moving away from the object as they choose and in their own time.
- the impact the enrichment has on the rabbits' physical and mental wellbeing is monitored. If there is a negative impact, the enrichment should be removed or changed immediately.

Regardless of the number of enrichment items given, it remains important that rabbits always have enough space to move around, run, jump, and stretch upright.

PART 6: Breeding



Introduction

For breeders of rabbits, consideration needs to be given to the frequency at which individual rabbits are used for breeding and the age at which breeding commences and ends. Age of maturity varies with the breed and the individual rabbits, and breeders should ensure that the rabbit is adult and well grown before it is used for breeding.

The availability of new homes for kittens which result from breeding should also be considered before breeding.

7. Minimum Standard – Breeding

- Breeders must make all reasonable efforts to ensure that the genetic make-up of both sire and dam will not result in an increase in the frequency or severity of known inherited disorders or undesirable traits.*
- Breeders must not breed from litter mates, or from parents to offspring.*
- Females must not be intentionally mated before they are 6 months of age.*
- Breeding must only take place after it has been ascertained that there are suitable homes available for the kittens.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 7- Breeding

- In commercial facilities, policy documents specify the following:
 - > Criteria to be considered when selecting a new owner, including a minimum age of the owner
 - > Breed-specific potential inherited disorders are disclosed to new owners
 - > Records of disclosure documents, signed by the new owner and detailing the illness, injury or inherited disorders of a rabbit sold or rehomed, are maintained
 - > Records of temperament evaluation of a rabbit sold or rehomed are maintained



- Except under exceptional circumstances, rabbits offered for sale or rehoming are no less than 8 weeks
- Vaccination, parasite treatment, desexing and microchipping records are maintained
- Breeders keep records of animals bred including lineage, age at breeding, and number of litters

Recommended Best Practice

- Only rabbits who
 - > are well grown; and
 - > are in good health and physical condition; and
 - > have a favourable temperament
 should be used for breeding. At all times, the health and welfare of the rabbits should remain paramount.
- Females should not be mated so as to give birth to kittens and rear litters continually.
- Preventative healthcare in the form of vaccination and parasite control should be carried out on rabbits used for breeding, under veterinary advice.
- The female rabbit should be taken to the male's cage/area for mating to minimise the male's scent-marking behaviour and to reduce the risk of fighting.
- Kittens should be sexed by a competent person and sexes separated by 12 weeks of age.

General Information

Persons considering undertaking rabbit breeding need to inform themselves about what is involved before they start and consider how they will manage the problems that can arise with unwanted litters. Ensuring there is a market for the offspring before breeding will reduce the risk of unwanted rabbits.

If an unintended mating has taken place, veterinarians can provide advice on preventing or terminating an unwanted pregnancy, with best success if consulted without delay.

6.1 Desexing

Introduction

Unplanned breeding of rabbits is not recommended because of the potential to add to the existing unwanted rabbit population. To prevent unplanned breeding rabbits should be desexed.

For companion rabbits, unplanned or indiscriminate breeding can cause animal welfare issues associated with insufficient care, inappropriate disposal of unwanted kittens, as well as potential health and temperament issues.

Recommended Best Practice

- Rabbits, other than those kept by a responsible farmer or breeder for breeding purposes, should be desexed as soon as they are of a sufficient weight to undergo anaesthesia.
- Where rabbits have not been desexed, males and females should be securely housed away from each other to prevent accidental mating.



- (c) Rabbits sold from a pet shop or rehomed from an animal welfare organisation should be desexed before sale/adoption.
- (d) Veterinarians, pet shops, rabbit breeders, local councils and animal welfare organisations should continually encourage the desexing of companion rabbits in the community.

General Information

Desexing of rabbits is a significant surgical procedure under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 and must only be carried out by a veterinarian or a veterinary student under direct supervision.

Female rabbits breed easily and can reproduce from around 4- 6 months of age, depending on the breed. Desexing can be safely carried out by a veterinarian as soon as the rabbit meets the required weight for anaesthesia. Desexing is recommended once the rabbits reach sexual maturity; desexing at 3-6 months for females and 3-4 months for males is considered easier as the rabbit will have less body fat allowing for easier identification of surgical targets.

There are health and welfare advantages of having rabbits desexed: the risk of female rabbits developing ovarian, uterine and mammary cancers is greatly reduced; the desire of males to fight with other rabbits due to hormonal aggression is significantly lowered and they are less likely to spray urine. Desexed rabbits are also calmer, more affiliative with people, less destructive, easier to litter train, and less likely to escape or roam. It also reduces the risk of unwanted breeding.

Increases in rates of rabbit desexing will enable better control of the domestic companion rabbit population, reduce the surplus of unwanted companion rabbits, protect the rabbit's health and well-being, and reduce the risk of domestic rabbits breeding with wild populations. Veterinarians, pet retailers, rabbit breeders, local councils and animal welfare organisations can facilitate this process by continuing to encourage the rabbit-owning public to have their rabbits desexed.

6.2 Pregnancy, Birthing and Lactation

Introduction

The length of gestation in the rabbit is about 31 days. Information about the stages of pregnancy, birthing and lactation can be obtained from experts such as veterinarians and animal welfare organisations.

8. Minimum Standard – Pregnancy, Birthing and Lactation

- a. Does who are due to give birth must be provided with a suitable birthing box or cage which is lined with hay and located in a safe, warm, adequately enclosed space, and in a quiet environment.*
- b. If a doe is exhibiting any signs which indicate that she is experiencing difficulties at any point during birthing, expert assistance must be sought.*
- c. Does must be provided a high-quality diet with increased fibre and nutrients during pregnancy, and lactation.*
- d. The doe must always have access to clean, fresh water while feeding the young.*



Example Indicators Minimum Standard 8- Pregnancy, Birthing, and Lactation

- A separate area that is suitable for birthing is provided to the doe
- Bedding material is provided to the doe
- Clean, fresh water is provided at all times
- A nutritionally balanced diet is available for the doe

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) If the doe gives birth outside the nesting/maternity box, the newborns should be moved into the nesting box immediately to avoid fatalities from exposure, as the doe will not move the kittens herself.
- (b) The mother rabbit should be allowed regular free-range time away from her kittens for short periods of time.

General Information

In the later stages of pregnancy and during lactation, the doe should be fed a complete and balanced diet that meets the nutritional demands of pregnancy/lactation. Pregnant and lactating rabbits need to be provided with an additional supplement of fibre and proteins through high-fibre pellet feed, and always have quality hay and water.

Female rabbits have very rich milk and only need to feed their kittens once or twice a day.

Wild mother rabbits stay away from the kittens except for when feeding. Domestic rabbits have the same instinct to stay away from their kittens, so it is important for the doe to have areas inaccessible to her kittens to reduce stress to the doe. Otherwise, there is a risk that she may attack and kill them.

If possible, the kittens should not be touched for a few days to reduce stress on the doe, especially if the mother is nervous around humans or new to her environment.

Other rabbits should be excluded from accessing the kittens to prevent the young from being harmed or killed or failing to thrive, and for reducing maternal stress and aggression. Improved welfare of socially housed does can be achieved with improved management of space including systems that allow does to only enter their own nestboxes, enriched pens, training to go into only their own nestbox, and maintaining group stability. Female rabbits can become pregnant again immediately after giving birth, therefore, contact with a buck after giving birth should be avoided due to the needs of the kittens and the physical demands that an immediate pregnancy would place on the doe. Prior to breeding, does should be in a state of good body condition to respond to the energy demands of pregnancy and subsequent lactation.

It is recommended that any male partners who live with the female are removed from the cage and are kept separate from her, but still within sight and smell so that their bond is not broken. The male rabbit should be desexed if breeding is not intended again, but it is important to remember that he can remain fertile for four weeks after castration. Female rabbits should also be desexed once the kittens are weaned, to prevent further pregnancies and eliminate the risk of uterine cancer.

Prior to the doe giving birth, a suitable nesting/maternity box or cage should be provided in a safe and quiet environment which is warm but well-ventilated. If the doe gives birth outside the nesting/maternity box, the newborns should be moved into the nesting box immediately to avoid fatalities from exposure, as the doe will not move the kittens herself.



6.3 Weaning and Removal of Kittens from the Doe

Introduction

Rabbit kittens rely on the dam's milk to obtain all nutrients for the first few days of life. Kittens' eyes will typically open at around 10 days old. They will begin to eat solid food (usually hay from around the nest) between 2-3 weeks old and by 3-4 weeks old they will eat the same foods as their mother. Kittens will often continue to take milk from their mother until they are around 4-6 weeks of age.

9. Minimum Standard – Removal of Kittens from the Doe

- a. *Kittens made available for sale or rehoming requiring removal from the doe must be in good health and must be at least 8 weeks of age, except where they have been orphaned and cannot be fostered to another doe or where early removal from the doe is deemed necessary by a veterinarian.*
- b. *Kittens must have access to hay for feeding from at least two weeks of age.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 9- Removal of Kittens from the Doe

- For commercial facilities, policy documents specify the following:
 - > Criteria to be considered when selecting a new owner, including a minimum age of the owner
 - > Breed-specific potential inherited disorders are disclosed to new owners
 - > Records of disclosure documents, signed by the new owner and detailing the illness, injury or inherited disorders of a rabbit sold or rehomed, are maintained
 - > Records of temperament evaluation of a rabbit sold or rehomed are maintained
- Except under exceptional circumstances, rabbits offered for sale or rehoming are no less than 8 weeks

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Kittens should remain with the doe to suckle for at least the first four weeks of age unless removed earlier for health and safety reasons.

Ages for when kittens are weaned vary (e.g., 6 weeks for companion rabbits; minimum of 21-35 days in European meat rabbit production). Weaning time should balance the welfare needs of the doe (energy balance, mammary health, and stress) and the kittens (growth and survival) with too early weaning harming the young, whereas later weaning can harm the doe. Weaning is a stressful time for the kittens. Diets should be formulated to optimise nutrition for the weaning kittens to reduce stressors during this time. Rabbits subjected to post-weaning feed restriction are likely to experience hungernow largely used by French professional rabbit breeders. Although a quantitative feed restriction leads to slower growth, feed conversion (FC, therefore, alternative strategies to feed restriction should, where possible, be used to reduce the risk of gastrointestinal problems.



6.4 Supply of Kittens and Rabbits

Introduction

It is important that new owners of companion rabbits are provided with information concerning proper care, socialisation, and clear guidance of the consequences of not desexing the kittens/rabbits.

10. Minimum Standard No. 10 – Supply of Kittens and Rabbits

- a. *Kittens must be able to feed independently and be in good health when made available for sale or rehoming, unless:*
 - > *they have been orphaned and must be rehomed to ensure that they are able to obtain milk from another doe or be hand raised; or*
 - > *early removal from the doe is deemed necessary by a veterinarian.*
- b. *People supplying rabbits must, at the time of supply, disclose to persons receiving them, any known inherited disorders, health, or behavioural conditions that the young or adult rabbit may be predisposed to or suffering from which may cause health and/or welfare problems during the rabbit's lifetime.*
- c. *People supplying rabbits must disclose the rabbit's vaccination and desexing status at the time of sale or transfer of ownership.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 10- Supply of Kittens and Rabbits

- For commercial facilities, policy documents specify the following:
 - > Criteria to be considered when selecting a new owner, including a minimum age of the owner
 - > Breed-specific potential inherited disorders are disclosed to new owners
 - > Records of disclosure documents, signed by the new owner and detailing the illness, injury or inherited disorders of a rabbit sold or rehomed, are maintained
 - > Records of temperament evaluation of a rabbit sold or rehomed are maintained
- Except under exceptional circumstances, animals offered for sale or rehoming are no less than 8 weeks
- Vaccination, parasite treatment, microchipping and desexing records are maintained.

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Rabbits should have begun socialisation with other rabbits and humans when made available for sale or rehoming.
- (b) People selling rabbits as companion animals should allow the intending new owner to interact with the kitten/rabbit.
- (c) People selling rabbits should provide information on the rabbit's current diet to ensure the maintenance of an appropriate diet and to facilitate any changes in diet.
- (d) People supplying rabbits should provide specific information on Rabbit Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (RVHD).



PART 7: Health



7.1 Ill Health and Injury

Introduction

Health and welfare are closely linked. Owners have a responsibility to maintain their rabbits in good health and to treat injury and disease when it occurs.

Signs of ill health are listed in [Appendix III](#) of this code.

11. Minimum Standard – Ill Health and Injury

a. Owners, or persons in charge of rabbits, who observe a rabbit to be showing:

- > signs of significant acute pain, suffering or distress; or
- > signs of chronic pain, suffering or distress; or
- > signs of rapidly deteriorating health; or
- > serious injury; or
- > signs of repeated straining over a continuous period of 30 minutes, as if to pass urine or faeces;
- > signs of difficulty breathing; or
- > uncontrolled, profuse bleeding

must seek immediate attention from a veterinarian or appropriately trained animal health practitioner.

b. If a rabbit is suffering from extreme pain or distress that is untreatable, then the animal must be humanely euthanased immediately.

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 11- Ill Health and Injury

- No sick or injured rabbits are left untreated
- There is documented evidence that a veterinarian is consulted if a significant rabbit health problem persists
- There is documented evidence that a veterinarian is consulted if a rabbit is euthanised
- No rabbit exhibits pain or distress due to matting of fur or to overgrowth of nails or teeth
- For commercial facilities, rabbit health records show that all rabbit remedies have been used appropriately
- For commercial facilities, a rabbit first aid kit is kept onsite and all staff are aware of the contents of the kit, demonstrate knowledge of how to treat a minor injury and of when veterinary assistance is required



- For commercial facilities, there is evidence that staff are trained and possess the knowledge and competence to recognise ill health and injury in rabbits and to undertake prompt action and treatment as necessary
- For commercial facilities, daily inspections and remedial outcomes are documented

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) The health and welfare of each rabbit should be checked daily, including observing whether the rabbit is eating, drinking, moving, and behaving normally.
- (b) All ill or injured rabbits should be examined by a veterinarian.
- (c) An attempt should be made to locate the owner or person in charge of rabbits who are found injured or unwell.
- (d) Rabbits of unknown ownership who are observed to be significantly injured or unwell should receive urgent veterinary attention to alleviate pain or distress.
- (e) A veterinarian should be consulted immediately if a rabbit is bleeding profusely for more than a few minutes.

General Information

Treatment can be provided by veterinarians or appropriately trained and experienced practitioners. Injuries such as puncture wounds, which often appear insignificant, can be worse than they look. Advice should therefore be sought if any doubt exists about their severity.

Courses on first aid for animals are available through some veterinary clinics and polytechnics.

[Part 12](#) of this Code deals with euthanasia.

Abscesses

An abscess is a walled-off pocket of infection containing infective bacteria. These are fairly common in rabbits and may cause considerable distress if they are not detected and dealt with promptly. Abscesses are often the result of wounds that become infected (e.g., bites or scratches) or dental disease, but they can also be caused by the presence of “foreign bodies” such as grass seeds, splinters, or lodged food. Abscesses can be very painful and may result in the spread of potentially life-threatening infections through the rabbit’s body, especially when there is a deterioration in the rabbit’s health or nutritional status. Jaw abscesses are common in rabbits and can be difficult to notice until the rabbit eats less, becomes withdrawn or an external lump appears. Immediate veterinary attention is required in all cases. In addition, analgesia should always be given in the treatment of abscesses as rabbits show very subtle signs of pain and discomfort, which can often be overlooked.

Pain

Accurately assessing and treating pain in rabbits is important to prevent negative impacts to their welfare. Pain in rabbits can be difficult to assess due in part to their nature of being a prey animal and adaptation to masking clinical signs of pain include:

- Production of fewer, smaller, or no faecal pellets
- Half-closed or dull, unfocused eyes or squinting
- Aggression in a normally docile animal



- Pushing abdomen to the floor
- Chewing at the affected site
- Immobility/lethargy
- Isolation from bonded mates or humans
- Over-grooming/lack of grooming
- Vocalization (squeal usually indicates fear in rabbits)
- Stretching with back arched
- Stinting (i.e., guarding or tensing) on palpation
- Hunched posture
- Teeth grinding (bruxism)
- Tucked appearance to abdomen
- Strained facial expression with bulging eyes
- Increased frequency and depth of respirations
- Rapid shallow breathing Lameness/ataxia/stiff movements
- Anorexia
- Polyuria/polydipsia (especially w/GI pain)
- Head extended and elevated
- Piloerection Porphyrin secretion (stress)
- Self-mutilation Absence of normal behaviours

The rabbit grimace scale has also been developed to facilitate the assessment of pain. The rabbit grimace scale includes an assessment of orbital tightening, cheek flattening, nostril shape, whisker shape and position, and ear shape and position to infer if pain is not present, moderately present, or obviously present. The use of body postures can also improve the assessment of pain in rabbits.

7.2 Disease and Illness Related to Diet

Introduction

Feeding unbalanced or inadequate diets to rabbits can cause significant health and welfare problems, including obesity, gastrointestinal problems, and poor dental health.

More information about an appropriate rabbit diet is provided in [Part 3: Food and Water](#) of this Code.

12. Minimum Standard – Disease and Illness Related to Diet

- Owners, or persons in charge of rabbits, who observe a rabbit to be showing significant or unexpected changes in appetite must seek immediate attention from a veterinarian or appropriately trained animal health practitioner.*
- Rabbits' incisors must be checked regularly by their owners and routinely checked by their veterinarian and appropriate action taken where tooth health deteriorates.*
- Veterinary attention must be sought if any rabbit's caecotrophs are soft, as this may be a sign of multiple physical and mental health problems.*



Example Indicators Minimum Standard 12- Disease and Illness Related to Diet

There is documented evidence that a veterinarian is consulted if significant or unexpected changes in appetite arise.

General Information

If a rabbit is suffering from an illness or disease, special attention to the rabbit's diet may be required. Both decreased and increased appetite can indicate underlying disease or other health problems, such as gastro-intestinal stasis.

Dental disorders, including disease and abnormalities, are some of the most common health-related problems seen in rabbits. Teeth and gums are also affected by an overconsumption of human food and treats leading to a lack of abrasion on the teeth or imbalance in nutrition. Rabbit teeth examination should be routinely performed by a veterinarian.

Obesity can be caused by insufficient exercise and/or poor diet. Providing too much commercial food and treats results in overweight rabbits who select these items instead of the healthier hay or grass alternative. Teeth and gums are also affected by an overconsumption of these products.

Overweight rabbits may not be able to clean themselves properly or reach their caecotrophs from their rear end which puts them at greater risk of skin infections and flystrike. The extra weight they carry also puts strain on all their joints and organs, especially the heart and liver.

Changes in faecal consistency in rabbits can be caused by intestinal disturbance, stress or underlying disease, and obesity. The presence of soft, uneaten caecotrophs (which may be confused as diarrhoea) can be caused by a sudden disturbance in gut flora usually associated with consuming foods with too much starch or insufficient fibre or failing to introduce new foods gradually. Diarrhoea in young rabbits can occur during weaning due to an imbalance of starch in their diet, or proliferation of pathogenic bacteria due to too much starch in the diet, bacterial or viral enteritis or reaction to antibiotics.

Gut stasis/ gastrointestinal hypomobility/impaction/ ileus are common and potentially life-threatening medical conditions of rabbits. Gastric dilatation and obstruction are also considered a common pet rabbit health problem and most likely caused by compressed hair or pellets, whole dried pulses, carpet, or other small objects; but also linked with cancer, or post-spay adhesions.

7.3 Prevention of Infectious Disease

Introduction

Vaccination is an important means of controlling infectious diseases such as viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD). Infectious diseases can rapidly spread among unvaccinated rabbits, with consequent tragic impacts on animal welfare. Minimum standards and recommendations for best practice relating to ill-health ([Section 7.1 Ill Health and Injury](#)) also apply to the management of rabbits with infectious diseases, although there is no effective treatment for VHD.



13. Minimum Standard – Prevention of Infectious Disease

- a. *Owners, or persons in charge of rabbits, who suspect that their rabbit may be showing signs of being infected with an infectious disease must seek appropriate immediate veterinary care or euthanasia for the rabbit and must take suitable steps including use of a quarantine period to prevent the animal from infecting other rabbits, including use of a quarantine period.*
- b. *Houses, bedding, or other substances from areas accessed by rabbits infected or suspected to be infected with VHD must never be reused.*
- c. *The rabbit's cage and areas that the rabbit accesses must be regularly cleaned/ disinfected, and bedding litter should be regularly changed.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 13 - Prevention of Infectious Disease

- An appropriate vaccination history is held for all rabbits for which vaccination is relevant
- Rabbits show signs of contagious disease
- In commercial facilities, animals that are suspected of carrying a contagious disease are placed in isolation for observation and/or veterinary treatment
- In commercial facilities, if a disease outbreak is suspected, animals are compartmentalised to reduce the spread of infection and details of the intervention are documented

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Rabbits should be provided with protection against infectious disease by vaccination and regular boosters according to veterinary recommendations.
 - > When kittens are five to eight weeks old, or rabbits are rehomed as companion animals.
- (b) As far as possible, insects should be controlled around rabbits to reduce the risk of infection. Flies and mosquitoes can be deterred and, where relevant, all companion animals in the home should be treated for fleas.
- (c) Contact with wild rabbits should be prevented.

Maintaining good husbandry for a rabbit's area is critical to preventing many health-related problems. Wild rabbits can also transmit parasites to domestic rabbits; therefore, it is important that wild rabbits are prevented from interacting with domestic rabbits.

7.4 Parasitic Diseases

Introduction

Parasite infestation can cause disease and death. Where environmental conditions permit, parasite populations can become large, while animals suffering ill health may also have parasites. Rabbits can develop hypersensitivity to parasites and show extreme skin irritation, even with very low parasite numbers.



Rabbits do not require routine worming. If there are indications of that a rabbit requires deworming, then a faecal examination and administration of anthelmintic can be performed by a veterinarian.

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Rabbits should be given regular and effective treatments to prevent internal and external parasite burdens, as recommended by veterinarians or product manufacturers.
- (b) Rabbits should be checked regularly for signs of infestation with external parasites e.g., scratching, chewing or hair loss, and should be treated appropriately.
- (c) Rabbits should only be treated with products intended for use on rabbits.

General Information

Many diseases and infections, including those resulting from flystrike, can be related to poor hygiene. All rabbits, even those living in clean, hygienic environments can be susceptible to parasites. In small numbers these parasites may cause minimal disturbance to the rabbits, but if their numbers increase, or the problem remains chronic, significant discomfort can be caused, and the welfare of the rabbits may be compromised.

External parasites that live on the skin of rabbits include fleas, mites, ticks, and lice. These can be a significant cause of distress and ill health. Some mites are microscopic and invisible to the naked eye, but can cause dandruff, scabs, and loss of fur. Excessive rubbing or scratching is an indicator of the potential presence of external parasites. Fleas or flea dirt (black coils that turn red when moistened with water) may also be seen in the coat.

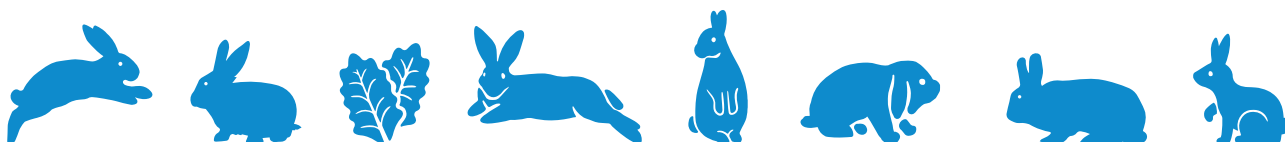
Long-haired rabbits may have more difficulty with external parasites if their fur becomes knotted through lack of grooming. Matted areas prove a haven for fleas and may cause severe discomfort for the rabbit. Effective treatments and preventive programmes are available. Only products specifically recommended for use on rabbits should be used, as some products are not suitable and may be toxic and cause fatal seizures.

Internal parasites, such as pinworm, roundworm, and tapeworm, can be ingested by rabbits. Suitable treatment and advice can be obtained from veterinary practices. Other animals, such as cats and dogs, who may encounter rabbits should be regularly wormed.

The signs of mange, which is caused by mites, include hair loss, flaky skin, redness, sores, and sometimes itchy skin. Treatment can be difficult particularly in advanced cases, and it is important to seek veterinary help at an early stage of the disease. Some types of mange also affect humans.

The ears of rabbits should be checked regularly for ear mites. An infestation may cause excessive scratching of the ears and a dark-brown discharge inside the ears.

Advice on the appropriate treatment of the environment and animals should be sought where there is an infestation of any parasite.



7.5 Diseases of the Skin

Introduction

Skin diseases can occur in rabbits and may cause considerable pain and distress.

14. Minimum Standard – Disease of the skin

a. Rabbits must be provided with sufficient shade to prevent sunburn and skin cancer.

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 14- Disease of the Skin

- Rabbits have unrestricted access to natural or artificial shade.

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Rabbits with minimal hair covering and/or pale skin on the nose or ears should be protected from sunburn and the potential for skin cancer by keeping them out of direct sunlight during the sunniest times of the day.

General Information

Sunscreen is not recommended for rabbits as it is likely to be ingested during grooming. The provision of sufficient shade can avoid the need to use sunscreen. However, if sunscreen is going to be used, then the highest protection child-safe water resistant (but not zinc oxide) total sunblock is recommended.

There are many causes of skin disease in rabbits including allergies, parasitic diseases, fungal infection such as ringworm, bacterial infection, nutritional imbalances, and hormone disorders. Few of these conditions are resolved without appropriate treatment. Delays in seeking help may lead to worsening of the condition as the rabbit damages their skin further by chewing and scratching, and to complications such as secondary bacterial infections which may then require additional treatment.

7.6 Diseases Transmissible to Humans (Zoonoses)

General Information

Some diseases (e.g., Cheyletiellosis, Dermatophytosis, Ectoparasites, Pasteurellosis and Salmonellosis) can be transmissible between rabbits and other species, including humans (zoonotic diseases). Owners and handlers can act as a vehicle for transmission and unknowingly transfer diseases from rabbit to rabbit. Veterinarians, veterinary nurses, the SPCA and other animal welfare agencies, rabbit farmers, breeders and pet retailers should therefore take every opportunity to prevent the spread of disease. In addition, those groups and individuals who advise rabbit owners should help the public to understand the health risks they are exposed to from their association with rabbits and direct them to where appropriate advice can be obtained.

Where a zoonotic disease has been diagnosed, a discussion with a veterinarian is recommended to enable the owner of the rabbit to make an informed decision on the best course of action for both the



rabbit and owner. This will avoid misunderstanding which may result in the owner being unaware of the potential public health risk of a condition, putting themselves and their family at risk, or alternatively, having a rabbit unnecessarily euthanased.

7.7 Care of Claws and Coat

Introduction

Neglected coat and claws can cause considerable distress and suffering. Hygiene around the perineum, anus and tail is particularly important in all rabbits to reduce soiling and the risk of flystrike.

Minimum standards and recommendations for best practice relating to ill-health ([Section 7.1 Ill Health and Injury](#)) also apply to the management of rabbits with ailments relating to claws and coat.

15. Minimum Standard – Care of Claws and Coat

- a. The coats of long-haired rabbits must be groomed and/or clipped at a frequency that will prevent suffering and distress caused by matting or parasite infestation.*
- b. Claws must be carefully clipped when necessary to avoid penetration of the skin and/or foot pads.*
- c. Immediate veterinary treatment must be sought for rabbits found to have symptoms of flystrike.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 15- Care of Claws and Coat

- Rabbits claws are kept short enough to prevent injury
- There are no matting or parasites present in the rabbit's coat
- No long-haired rabbit has an excessively long coat that is either soiled, impedes movement or causes skin or other disease, especially in hot weather conditions.

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Owners should examine their rabbits' claws and coat at least once a day, especially in warm weather when grass seed penetration is more common.

General Information

Rabbits moult regularly. Rabbits who are moulting or who have long hair need much more frequent grooming to prevent them from ingesting too much hair. Hygiene around the perineum, anus and tail is particularly important in all rabbits to reduce soiling and the risk of flystrike.

Mats of hair harbour external parasites and dermatitis is likely to develop in the underlying skin. Mats can usually be gently brushed out. However, rabbit skin is very delicate and is easily torn or cut, so if the matting on a rabbit needs to be cut out then a veterinarian or other experienced person should undertake this task.

Long hair can predispose rabbits to grass seeds penetrating their skin and ears. Owners should regularly check rabbits for grass seeds during the late summer period.



Rabbits should not be bathed unless specifically recommended by a veterinarian. Washing rabbits is potentially very harmful to the animals and is likely to cause problems. Rabbits tend to panic when in water and can easily fracture their spine or a limb if they thrash around. In addition, it is difficult to dry rabbit hair which clumps together when wet and rabbits who are left damp are prone to respiratory problems and hypothermia. Localised cleaning with a damp, warm cloth on a warm, dry day is best to clean a rabbit's rear end if this is necessary. Maintaining short fur around the rear will help keep the area dry and easier to clean.

The claws of rabbits who get little or no exercise on hard surfaces may become overgrown. Long claws need careful trimming with sharp clippers taking care not to damage the quick of the nail (the nail bed) which will be painful and result in bleeding and possible infection. Veterinarians, veterinary nurses, or professional groomers can assist and advise on trimming claws.

Flystrike

Flystrike occurs when flies lay their eggs on an animal, and the eggs hatch out into maggots. The maggots from flies are very dangerous as they can eat into an animal's flesh within 24 hours, causing death.

Flies will lay eggs anywhere they smell blood or dirt, so wounds are a target, but dirty or wet bottoms are the most common cause of this problem. Rabbits who are unclean, have a poor diet, are overweight or who have mobility problems are at the greatest risk of flystrike. Flystrike can affect healthy rabbits too, especially if their cage is not cleaned frequently. Faecal matter and moist bedding should be regularly removed from the rabbits' environment.

Rabbits with flystrike may show responses such as: lethargy/depression, anorexia, soiling of perineum and tail fold, diarrhoea, dehydration, hair loss, skin erosion or necrosis, weight loss, presence of eggs and larvae, and fetid smell.

7.8 Harmful Substances

Introduction

Unlike many other mammals, rabbits are unable to vomit. This means that ingesting compounds which would normally induce vomiting in other animals may go unnoticed. Not only are rabbits unable to get rid of the poison by vomiting, but also, because they are caecotrophic, a toxic compound can be recycled through the digestive system. Rabbits can also ingest toxic substances from their coats when grooming.

Rabbits are susceptible to accidental poisoning by many substances including poisonous plants, household cleaners and contaminated water. Some medicines for humans or other animals may be poisonous to rabbits, so it is essential never to treat or medicate rabbits unless recommended or prescribed by a veterinarian.



16. Minimum Standard – Harmful Substances

- a. *Owners and persons in charge of rabbits must take all practical steps to ensure that rabbits are not exposed to poisons and harmful substances.*
- b. *Owners and persons in charge of rabbits who are known to have consumed a harmful substance or showing signs indicative of poisoning (e.g., tremors, seizures, loss of appetite, sudden drowsiness, or collapse) must seek immediate veterinary attention.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 16- Harmful Substances

- Harmful substances such as poisons, toxic plants, or irritating chemicals are not present in the rabbit's area
- Enclosure/exercise locations have been examined for potentially harmful objects that a rabbit could eat such as toxic plants and chords/cables

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Houseplants should be kept where rabbits cannot reach them and dropped leaves or petals should be collected quickly and disposed of.
- (b) Pesticides should be kept away from areas that rabbits can access.
- (c) Rabbit housing or exercise areas that are outdoors must be free from, and not overhung by, poisonous plants.
- (d) Rabbits' water supplies should be changed regularly so that it cannot become contaminated.

General Information

Rabbits can be poisoned by substances (e.g., poisonous indoor or outdoor plants), chemicals (e.g., rodent poison) and lead (e.g., chewing or licking lead-containing substances, such as painted surfaces or metallic objects). Rabbits can also have adverse reactions to many common topical products or medicines that are safe for use in other mammals, such as shampoos, sprays, or antibiotics.

Rabbits are susceptible to 1080 poison and many other pesticides such as anticoagulants, and vitamin D, so it is important to know if use of pesticides occurs near your rabbit.

Rabbits can be poisoned by drinking water polluted with toxins such as sheep dip, horticultural sprays, antifreeze etc, and care should therefore be taken to cover polluted water or prevent access to it.

7.9 Care of Older Rabbits

Introduction

As rabbits age, their needs often change and some adjustments to their care may be required. Some health problems of older rabbits may be interpreted by the owner as part of the natural ageing process, but in many cases the difficulties of advancing age can be managed by treatment and/or improved nutrition. Veterinary and nutritional advice and specific treatments should be sought to help the aging rabbit.



Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Rabbits over the age of five years should receive regular veterinary checks to ensure that their health and welfare is maintained by early diagnosis and treatment of age-related problems and diseases.

General Information

Rabbits come in various shapes and sizes, and so there is no exact classification as to when a rabbit becomes “old aged”. It has been suggested that rabbits can be considered geriatric at five years of age. Some rabbits may show signs of aging sooner than others, therefore the changing needs of ageing rabbits should be assessed and considered on an individual basis.

As rabbits age, their need for warmth, free access to water, and nutritious and easily digested food increases. Commercial pellet feed for older rabbits is available however, limiting the number of pellets is recommended for older rabbits. Senior rabbits should receive a balanced diet with plenty of fresh hay and greens to meet their nutritional requirements.

Obesity, dental disease, reproductive cancers, spondylosis, and arthritis are common age-related diseases of rabbits. Older rabbits that are also obese and have decreased mobility may be at more risk to pododermatitis. Senior rabbits are likely to become less mobile and may require their claws to be clipped more frequently, as they will not be naturally wearing them down. For comfort, older rabbits should be provided with soft floor covering, extra litter boxes, more ground floor space (rather than multiple levels and ramps), better traction and soft bedding to improve their quality of life. Their anal regions may require regular cleaning with damp cloth if there is faecal and/or urinal accumulation.

7.10 Surgical Procedures

General Information

Rabbits should never be fasted (have their food withheld) prior to surgery. Rabbits should continue to be fed and given water as normal. Rabbits are unable to vomit so their gut motility should be maintained right up to, during and after surgery.

Surgical procedures need to be conducted in a manner that manages any associated pain and distress. [The Act](#) places restrictions on the performance of surgical procedures; all surgical procedures carried out on rabbits must be conducted in accordance with the Act. If in doubt about a surgical procedure, veterinary advice should be sought.



PART 8: Behaviour and Training



8.1 Behaviour

Introduction

Rabbits are a highly intelligent species and require sufficient enrichment to promote normal development and prevent abnormal behaviour. Inappropriate behaviours in rabbits, such as barbering or aggression, often have underlying causes such as inappropriate living conditions, health problems, frustration, or boredom from a lack of suitable companionship.

Providing a suitable desexed companion and/or altering or enriching the environment may be effective in reducing inappropriate behaviour. It should also be noted that desexing, especially at an earlier age, will reduce the likelihood of some rabbit behaviours that are undesirable to humans (such as spraying and aggression).

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Rabbits should have the opportunity to socialise with other rabbits every day.
- (b) Bonded rabbits should not be separated unless absolutely necessary.
- (c) Companion rabbits should be desexed to encourage positive behaviours and to allow for other rabbits to be housed together without risk of breeding or aggression.
- (d) Rabbits should be provided with areas suitable for digging and places to hide.
- (e) Rabbits should be provided with items suitable for chewing.
- (f) Rabbits should not be punished by physical means for displaying unwanted or inappropriate behaviour.

General Information

Where a behavioural problem occurs, it is important to look at all aspects of the rabbit and their living situation and advice should be obtained from a veterinarian or responsible rabbit welfare group. The earlier that behavioural problems are addressed, the greater the chance of correcting them.

Ideally, rabbits should not be housed alone – they are a social species who need to be housed with at least one other rabbit. Keeping a rabbit on their own means that they are more likely to display unwanted behavioural problems in response to unmet social needs. Rabbits that are not socialised are also deprived of social interaction and opportunities to play. Rabbits should live with compatible rabbits, ideally in desexed male/female pairs. Introductions between rabbits that are unfamiliar to each other or regrouping of known rabbits should be done carefully to minimise stress and reduce the chance of injury. It is also important to avoid social stress associated with overcrowding rabbits.

Desexing provides both health and behavioural benefits and is important to prevent unwanted births. It is recommended that even same-sex pairs should be desexed to prevent potential behavioural



problems. Male rabbits can remain fertile from 4-6 weeks post castration, which should be considered prior to introductions to undesexed female rabbits. Rabbits who are desexed and provided with enough space, enrichment, appropriate nutrition, and a suitable companion do not usually exhibit behavioural problems. For example, a desexed rabbit has less desire to try to escape to find a mate and so is less likely to attempt to dig out of their enclosure. This is important to note if digging behaviour is problematic. It is recommended that even same-sex pairs be desexed to prevent potential behavioural problems.

Rabbits may display behaviours that are natural for them, but undesirable for humans, such as the desire to escape (e.g., escaping potential harm), digging, chewing, burrowing, and hiding. While these innate behaviours cannot be modified, they can be managed with the provision of appropriate environmental enrichment, such as a suitable area for digging, places to burrow or hide, and enrichment for distraction and mental stimulation. Similarly, with chewing, it is important that rabbits have opportunities to wear down their teeth to prevent them from becoming overgrown as their teeth grow continuously. Therefore, rabbits should always be provided hay, and items that are safe and suitable for chewing.

Aggressive and/or irritable behaviour may also be due to an underlying medical issue, be age-related or be due to inappropriate handling. Physical punishment of rabbits may result in the development of either excessive timidity or aggression in the animals.

Fireworks

Many rabbits find the sound and sight of fireworks very frightening. They are a prey species and are naturally fearful of danger. Lightning, thunder, and gunshots may also have a similar effect. Rabbits need to have somewhere to hide at times when fireworks may be let off and should be given enrichment and forage to distract them. If possible, outdoor enclosures should be covered and/or rabbits should be temporarily kept in an area with the least possible exposure to the sight and sound of fireworks.

8.2 Training

Introduction

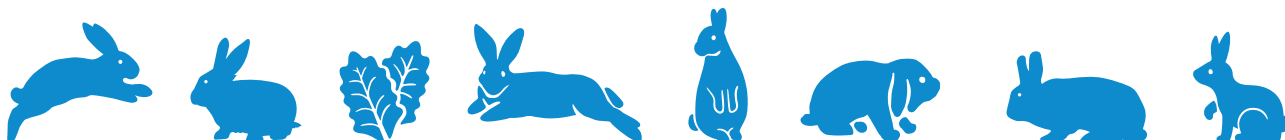
Rabbits are intelligent animals who can be trained to carry out a variety of behaviours.

17. Minimum Standard – Training

- a. *Any training methods or equipment used must apply reward-based learning and must not cause rabbits to experience physical discomfort or distress.*
- b. *Aversive training techniques or equipment that seeks to control or punishes rabbits must never be used.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 17- Training

- Aversive training equipment such as spray bottles, electronic or ultrasonic training aids are not present
- In commercial facilities, persons in charge of rabbits can demonstrate knowledge of reward-based training techniques



Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Humane methods and equipment that apply reward-based learning should include food, praise, petting, and play based on the individual rabbit's needs.

General Information

Humane methods and equipment that apply reward-based learning effectively accomplish the training objective without causing distress or pain to the animal. Rabbits can be trained using positive reinforcement. Rabbits are easily frightened or stressed, which, should be considered when handling and training takes place. Aversive training techniques or equipment are based on the principle of directly and deliberately applying an unpleasant stimulus to the rabbit to stop or prevent unwanted behaviour. Aversive training techniques or equipment (e.g., citronella spray, electronic and ultrasonic training aids) must not be used with rabbits.

PART 9: Handling



Introduction

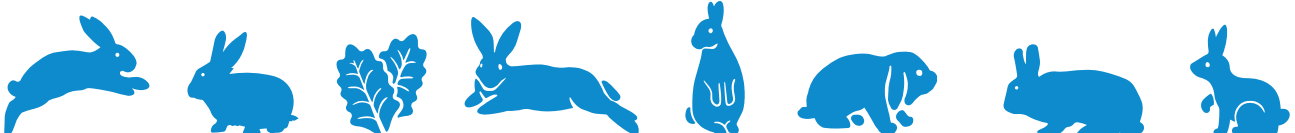
In the wild, the only time that rabbits would be picked up is if they were being caught by a predator. Domesticated rabbits are still a prey species so the fear of being lifted can remain. Rabbits who are panicked by being held may struggle and hurt their backs or legs, or may leap to the ground, injuring themselves in the process.

18. Minimum Standard – Handling

- a. Rabbits must never be lifted by their ears, or limbs.
- b. Rabbits must never be deliberately induced into “tonic immobility” (where a rabbit is held on their back so that it goes still, as if in a trance).
- c. Rabbits must be held with their spine and back legs supported.
- d. Rabbits must be lifted securely and not in a way that causes injury.

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 18- Handling

- Rabbits do not have injuries associated with improper handling
- Enclosures are designed with knowledge of rabbit behaviour and allows for easy and safe placement and removal of rabbits from enclosure
- Environment is structured to minimise handling (e.g., rabbit level entrances to enclosures)
- There is evidence of equipment to safely handle rabbits i.e. suitable carrier, towels



- Persons in charge of rabbits can demonstrate their knowledge of proper handling
- Rabbits are not picked up by ears or limbs
- Rabbits' weight is supported when lifted

Recommended Best Practice

- Rabbits should always be approached quietly
- Rabbits should be handled as little as is possible
- Rabbits should be gently stroked before being picked up so that they are aware of your presence.
- Rabbits should be held gently but securely against a person's chest with their back legs supported.
- Rabbits should never be squeezed when being handled.
- When being returned to the ground, rabbits should be lowered carefully and placed down gently.
- Parents/guardians/teachers should teach young children in their care how to properly handle a rabbit, so that both rabbit and child are secure and not harmed.
- Children should never be left alone to handle a rabbit.

General Information

Rabbits are naturally fearful of a sudden approach, especially from above. Lifting rabbits is stressful for the rabbit. Use of non-slip surfaces to handle rabbits can reduce the stress of handling. Efforts should be made to reduce the need to lift rabbits by use of boxes, baskets, or crates, including conducting veterinary assessments on the floor.

Rabbits' bones are fine, and their spines are fragile and can fracture or break easily. In addition, their internal organs can be easily damaged. Rabbits must never be squeezed. When being carried, their hind legs need to be held securely so that they cannot kick out and damage their spine. The use of a towel is recommended for supporting the back limbs.

A fear response is a common behavioural problem when rabbits are handled inappropriately or are not used to being handled. Rabbits who are handled gently from a young age are usually more confident to be held without struggling or panicking. Even with confident animals, it remains important to ensure that they are being held securely yet comfortably.

Patience will be needed to encourage some rabbits who are not used to being handled, as well as other rabbits who are in an unfamiliar environment or with unfamiliar people.

Scruffing rabbits is not recommended and should be avoided, unless there is an emergency, or when the rabbit is so nervous that scruffing is absolutely necessary. In these limited circumstances, their full weight should be supported by placing a hand underneath the rabbit. It is never necessary to lift a rabbit by the ears and this must never be undertaken.

Holding rabbits on their back until they go perfectly still, as if they are in a trance, is known as "tonic immobility", "hypnotising" or "trancing". This is a cruel way of handling rabbits. Tonic immobility is an automatic fear response carried out by rabbits who are terrified and "play dead". This action should never be deliberately used on rabbits as it is known to elicit a fear response. Researchers have shown, through monitoring the rabbits' behavioural and physiological responses to "trancing", that rabbits are aware of what is happening to their body and their surroundings during the "trance" and have increased heart rate and stress hormones. The only occasion when it is acceptable to use this stress response in



rabbits is when it is carried out by a veterinary surgeon in extreme circumstances to carry out lifesaving observations or to assist with lifesaving procedures. However, this should only be conducted as a last resort, and not as part of a routine groom or check-up. Rabbits who have frequently been placed in a “tonic immobility” position learn to anticipate when it is going to happen and become stressed more rapidly, thereby entering an immobile state more quickly. Rabbits do not have to be fully reclined to be in a “trance”.

PART 10: Transportation



Introduction

It is sometimes necessary to transport rabbits in vehicles. The Act requires that every person in charge of a vehicle in which an animal is being transported, must ensure that the welfare of the animal is properly attended to. Additional information about transport is contained in the [Code of Welfare: Transport within New Zealand](#).

19. Minimum Standard – Transportation

- a. Rabbits must be securely contained in a suitable carrier while being transported in a vehicle. The floor of the carrier must be supportive and covered with a soft or non-slip material to provide good traction for the rabbit to avoid injury.*
- b. Rabbits being transported must have sufficient space within the container to sit, turn around and rest in a normal position.*
- c. The interior of the container must be smooth, with no projections that could cause injury to the rabbit.*
- d. Rabbits must be provided with adequate ventilation both within the container (there should be multiple holes on at least three sides of the container) and the vehicle.*
- e. Rabbits must not be left unattended in a vehicle in conditions where the rabbit is likely to suffer from heat stress or die.*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 19- Transportation

- A travel container that secures a rabbit, provides the rabbit with enough space to turn around and is free from projections and rough surfaces is available
- A cover for the travel container that covers all areas of the rabbit's vision out of the container, without impeding ventilation, is available
- Rabbits are not suffering from heat stress (increased breathing rate, drooling, lethargy, wetness around the nose).



Recommended Best Practice

- (a) The rabbit's carrier should be positioned level in the vehicle, as a slanting carrier floor prevents the rabbit from sitting or lying down comfortably.
- (b) Carrier movement during the drive should be eliminated by ensuring that the carrier is properly restrained, for example by putting a seatbelt around the carrier or placing the carrier in a suitable restricted space within the vehicle.
- (c) The rabbit's container should not normally be carried in the closed boot of a car as this area has inadequate ventilation unless the circumstances are unforeseen, and this is the most appropriate way to transport them over a short distance.
- (d) Rabbits should not be left unattended in vehicles. If a rabbit must be left in a vehicle even for a short time, the vehicle should be parked in shade with more than one window left open to allow air to circulate so that heat stress will not occur.
- (e) When rabbits are transported together in a group, there should be easy and safe access to all rabbits by the owner or person in charge.
- (f) For journey's lasting longer than 30 minutes, a water source should be provided in a form of non-drip water bottle and sufficient hay should be provided.
- (g) Rabbits awaiting loading onto aircraft should be kept in a secure, tranquil, and quiet environment and should be sheltered from the elements.

General Information

Transportation can be a stressful time for rabbits, although as a prey species they are unlikely to display any symptoms of anxiety. It is therefore important to ensure that rabbits are transported in a manner that minimises distress and physical discomfort.

For their own safety and that of the people within the vehicle, rabbits should be transported within a suitable carry container which keeps them confined but comfortable. These containers are most suitably constructed from fiberglass, metal, rigid plastic, or weld metal mesh (although the weld metal mesh should not be at the bottom of the container to protect the rabbits' feet). Cardboard carry boxes have a limited lifespan for rabbits who can chew through them and should only be used in an emergency for a short period of time. Placing a thin cotton cloth over visually exposed containers can help to minimise the stress experienced by rabbits.

Care needs to be taken when transporting rabbits, especially in warmer weather. The temperature in a closed vehicle in full sun can reach 50 degrees Centigrade in less than 15 minutes. This will cause an enclosed rabbit's temperature to rise rapidly, followed by their extreme distress and rapid death. Rabbits are particularly susceptible to heat stroke because they have limited ways of getting rid of excess heat and cannot pant to cool off like some animals do. In addition, because rabbits are a prey species, they will not often show their distress in order not to appear vulnerable. Rabbits who have been heat stressed should be cooled by being wrapped in a damp (but not wet) towel, should be offered water to drink, and veterinary treatment should be sought immediately.

Rabbits being transported over long distances, either by road or by air, have additional requirements such as appropriate ventilation, and provision of water and food. Sedation of rabbits for transportation is not recommended. Where rabbits are to be transported over long distances, it is recommended that advice is sought from a veterinarian.



Any person wishing to export a rabbit from New Zealand to any country, including New Zealand dependencies, should seek advice from MPI Biosecurity New Zealand, a veterinarian, or a licensed animal transport agent. Any person wishing to bring their pet rabbit into New Zealand will only be able to do so if the rabbit is coming from Australia.

PART 11: Identification



Introduction

It is strongly recommended that rabbits be accurately identified, and their owners located in case they become lost or are stolen.

Recommended Best Practice

Companion rabbits should be implanted with a microchip, and that microchip should be registered on a recognised database within New Zealand.

General Information

Rabbits are a prey species and have a natural instinct to escape danger which can lead to rabbits becoming lost. It is important that if rabbits are found, they can be identified and reunited with their owners in such circumstances.

PART 12: Euthanasia*



Introduction

Euthanasia is the induction of a painless and rapid death. It is an [offence under the Act](#) to kill an animal in such a manner that it suffers unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress.

More information about the euthanasia of commercially farmed rabbits can be found in the [Code of Welfare: Commercial Slaughter](#).

**Please note: Section titles are set by NAWAC. SPCA prefers the term 'End of Life'.*



20. Minimum Standard – Euthanasia

- a. *When a rabbit is euthanased, it must be carried out in such a way as to ensure that death occurs quickly, and that pain and distress is minimised.*
- b. *Rabbits of any age must not be killed by drowning.*
- c. *Persons undertaking euthanasia must be competent in the handling and killing of rabbits.*
- d. *Farmed rabbits must be euthanased in accordance with the Code of Welfare: Commercial Slaughter (Part 4: Small Mammals).*

Example Indicators Minimum Standard 20- Euthanasia

- For commercial facilities, a documented protocol is in place that ensures:
 - > Rabbits are euthanased by methods prescribed in relevant codes of welfare or in relevant, accepted guidelines
 - > Persons undertaking humane killing or euthanasia are appropriately trained
 - > Death is confirmed following the procedure in a manner appropriate to the species
- For commercial facilities, full and comprehensive records are available for any rabbit that dies

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Companion rabbits should be euthanased by a veterinarian using an intravenous injection of a drug registered for this purpose.

General Information

The Act provides for the euthanasia of a severely injured or sick rabbit by a veterinarian, in whose opinion, the animal should be destroyed because reasonable treatment will not be sufficient to make the animal respond, and the animal will suffer unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress if it continues to live. A veterinarian may euthanise the rabbit without the permission of the owner, where the owner cannot be found within a reasonable time or where the owner does not agree to the euthanasia but does not obtain a secondary opinion from a veterinarian within a reasonable time. A warranted inspector or auxiliary officer under the Act (e.g., an SPCA inspector or auxiliary officer) may also perform this task; however, it is preferable that euthanasia be performed by a veterinarian if immediately available.

It is an offence to kill a rabbit of any age by drowning. Drowning is not considered a humane death. Drowning causes a series of physiological and chemical responses in the body resulting in fast and lasting decrease of oxygen in the blood, ingestion of liquid in the airways, acidosis, and high levels of carbon dioxide in the blood; all of these symptoms an animal experiences while conscious. Drowning leads to severe “air hunger”, which is considered the most unpleasant affective state associated with breathlessness.

- Farmed rabbits should be stunned prior to killing. Rabbits may be stunned using any of the following methods:



- Wall-mounted head-only electrodes, where the rabbit is held upside down with one hand spanning the loin and its head is inserted by hand between the two electrodes and held in position while the current is flowing. This electrical stunning system should only be used with isolated electrical circuits, otherwise there is a risk of current passing through the operator to earth.
- Cartridge or spring-fired captive bolt firearms, which are effective when operated correctly. However, care needs to be taken when placing the gun against the rabbit's head, as the skin over the head is loose and skin slip can spoil the aim.
- Manual concussion where the rabbit is held in one hand by the hind legs and struck on the back of the head with a heavy object held in the other hand.

For farmed rabbits, severance of major arteries supplying the brain and heart is an acceptable method of slaughter, provided that the rabbit has been first rendered insensible to pain by stunning.

Rabbits should be immediately bled out after they are successfully stunned. Neck dislocation may be used for small rabbits, but only after they have been stunned using one of the above methods.

PART 13: Contingency Planning



Introduction

Contingency plans for emergencies such as natural events e.g., earthquakes, floods, fires, storms, snow or drought, biosecurity events and infrastructure failures need to be in place to ensure the welfare of animals.

Natural Events

This is especially important considering climate change which can exacerbate existing climate extremes or cause extreme weather events in areas where they have previously only occurred in rare occasions. It is important that persons in charge of rabbits think ahead to ensure sufficient feed and water is available, enclosures can withstand adverse weather conditions, ventilation systems work effectively and have backup, and watering systems working effectively.

Civil Defence and Emergency Management (CDEM, located within local Councils) are responsible for leading responses to adverse events. The Ministry for Primary Industries is responsible for coordinating the response for animal welfare in adverse events.

Infrastructure Failures

Contingency plans for infrastructure failures such as power outages, that can affect water and feed supply, lighting, and ventilation must be in place.



Biosecurity and Disease events

Stock owners should have on farm biosecurity plans to address prevention of endemic diseases.

21. Minimum Standard – Contingency

a. Persons in charge of rabbits must have a documented contingency plan in place to address any anticipated adverse events which can negatively affect the welfare of the animals.

Example Indicators for Minimum Standard No. 19- Contingency Planning

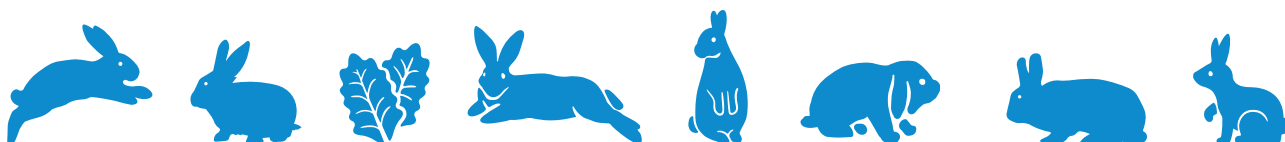
- A written contingency plan is available for inspection
- Persons in charge of rabbits are familiar with the contingency plan
- Alternative sources of food and water are available in case of emergencies
- There is a plan in place to evacuate animals if this is appropriate
- Biosecurity protocols are in place to reduce the risk of contagious disease outbreaks and address relevant action should these be unsuccessful
- Contingency plan covers large scale euthanasia in the event of contagious disease outbreak
- Persons in charge of rabbits are aware of the CDEM regional plan for animal welfare emergencies

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) Persons in charge of rabbits should be trained to implement the contingency plan.
- (b) Persons in charge of rabbits should be able to readily move animals to shelter/dry land in adverse weather before harm occurs, if this is possible.
- (c) In areas subject to floods and storms farmers should:
 - > follow weather forecasts and heed weather warnings
 - > ensure animals can be moved to safer and accessible ground as soon as possible
 - > hold sufficient stored feed at accessible and safe sites
 - > ask for assistance, if needed, from local and regional authorities including CDEM, farm management professionals or the farm veterinarian
 - > be aware of the [CDEM regional animal welfare plan for emergencies](#).
- (d) In areas prone to drought farmers should:
 - > have a plan in place that ensures rabbit feed requirements can be met before rabbit welfare is compromised
 - > ensure the availability of sources of suitable water, not dependent on rainfall
 - > ask for assistance, if needed, farm management professionals or the farm veterinarian.

General Information

Further information on preparing for emergencies and adverse events may be obtained by referring to the MPI website at www.mpi.govt.nz/protection-and-response/responding/adverse-events/.





Introduction

The maintenance of good records is an integral part of a welfare assurance system and good farm management.

22. Minimum Standard – Welfare Assurance System

- a. *Each commercial farm must have a fully documented and auditable welfare assurance system that ensures compliance with the minimum standards required by this Code.*
- b. *The welfare assurance system must be easily accessible to all personnel, and they must adhere to it.*
- c. *The documented system must identify:*
 - > *Positions of individual persons who are responsible for carrying out specific tasks; and*
 - > *Methods and procedures the owner or person in charge of animals will implement to achieve specified tasks; and*
 - > *System and frequency of checks on animals, facilities, and equipment; and*
 - > *Training, competence, and supervision of persons carrying out specified tasks; and*
 - > *Procedure for recording numbers and circumstances for all animal injuries and deaths on farm and the corrective actions taken; and*
 - > *Corrective actions that will be taken in the event of non-compliance with the requirements of the programme.*
- d. *The documented system must be verified using performance-based audits on at least an annual basis. Corrective actions must be completed as required by the audits.*

Example Indicators for Minimum Standard No. 20- Welfare Assurance System

- A documented assurance system is in place
- All staff adhere to the system
- The assurance system complies with the minimum standards in this Code
- The system is verified at least yearly and corrective actions are taken where necessary

Recommended Best Practice

- (a) The elements of the welfare assurance system should provide for the minimum standards and, where possible, the recommendations for best practice of this code. They should primarily be directed at the assessment of the welfare of the animal itself, and secondarily at management and housing aspects.



- (b) The welfare assurance system should provide for all incidents resulting in significant sickness, injury, or death of animals to be fully investigated and documented. Where the results of an investigation may have implications for current industry management practices, a report outlining the incident and implications should, as soon as it is available, be forwarded to the appropriate industry body for consideration.
- (c) The welfare assurance system should require continual review of existing practices and procedures that will improve the welfare of rabbits.
- (d) Animal handling procedures should be included as written procedures in the welfare assurance system.
- (e) The welfare assurance system should institute a process to facilitate employees to come forward and raise animal welfare concerns.

General Information

The adoption or adaptation of an industry generic welfare assurance programme for welfare and husbandry procedures may meet this standard.

Where improvements to current practice are identified, these are communicated to rabbit farmers via appropriate technology transfer methods such as seminars, workshops, and industry newsletters.



APPENDIX I:

Interpretation and Definitions

Act

The Animal Welfare Act 1999.

animal

As defined in the Act:

- a) Means any live member of the animal kingdom that is –
 - > A mammal; or
 - > A bird; or
 - > A reptile; or
 - > An amphibian; or
 - > A fish (bony or cartilaginous); or
 - > Any octopus, squid, crab, lobster, or crayfish (including freshwater crayfish); or
 - > Any other member of the animal kingdom which is declared from time to time by the Governor-General, by Order in Council, to be an animal for the purposes of this Act; and
- b) Includes any mammalian foetus, or any avian or reptilian pre-hatched young, that is in the last half of its period of gestation or development; and
- c) Includes any marsupial pouch young; but
- d) Does not include –
 - > A human being; or
 - > Except as provided in paragraph (b) or paragraph (c) of this definition, any animal in the pre-natal, pre-hatched, larval, or other such developmental stage.

body condition score

A scoring system used to classify the condition of animals, based on the assessment amount of fat and/or muscle covering they have (see [Appendix II: Assessment of Body Condition of Rabbits](#)).

buck

A male rabbit.

Commercial facility

A facility that has 100 rabbits including kittens at any one time. This also includes all laboratory facilities and rabbit meat and angora farms.

doe

A female rabbit.

domesticated rabbit

A rabbit (including a kitten unless otherwise stated) that is not of a wild breed and is dependent on and cared for by humans to maintain its welfare. For the purposes of this code, “rabbit” does not refer to wild rabbits who are living in the wild.



Wild rabbits are easily distinguishable by their wild-type coat colours, such as agouti (brown base ticked with dark hairs) and grey. Wild rabbits also tend to actively avoid human contact and generally fearful of anything new.

Domesticated rabbits are found in a variety of breeds, which can be distinguished using body shape, size, fur type and length.

euthanasia

Induction of death in a humane manner.

good practice

NAWAC takes to mean a standard of care that has a general level of acceptance among knowledgeable practitioners and experts in the field; is based on good sense and sound judgment; is practical and thorough; has robust experiential or scientific foundations; and prevents unreasonable or unnecessary harm to, or promotes interests of, the animals to which it is applied. Good practice also takes account of the evolution of attitudes about animals and their care.

ill-treat

As defined in section 2 of the Act: “in relation to an animal, means causing the animal to suffer, by any act or omission, pain or distress that in its kind or degree, or in its object, or in the circumstances in which it is inflicted, is unreasonable or unnecessary.”

juvenile

A young animal.

kitten

A young rabbit.

minimum standards

Minimum standards provide the details of specific actions people need to take to meet the obligations of the Act. They are identified in the text by heading and use the word “must” or similar. They are highlighted in boxes within the text.

owner

As defined in the Act:

“in relation to an animal, includes the parent or guardian of a person under the age of 16 years who –

- a) owns the animals; and
- b) Is a member of the parent’s or guardian’s household living with and dependent on the parent or guardian.”

person in charge

As defined in the Act: “in relation to an animal, includes a person who has an animal in that person’s possession or custody, or under that person’s care, control, or supervision.”

physiological state

Relates to the functioning of the body, its organs and body systems.



recommended best practice

NAWAC takes to mean the best practice agreed at a particular time, following consideration of scientific information, accumulated experience, and public submissions on this code. It is usually a higher standard of practice than the minimum standard, except where the minimum standard is best practice. A best practice that can be varied as new information becomes known. Recommendations for best practice will be particularly appropriate where it is desirable to promote or encourage better care for animals than is provided as a minimum standard. Recommended best practices are identified in the text by a heading and use the word “should”.

scientific knowledge

NAWAC takes to mean knowledge within animal-based scientific disciplines, especially those that deal with nutritional, environmental, health, behavioural and cognitive/neural functions, which are relevant to understanding the physical, health and behavioural needs of animals. Such knowledge is not haphazard or anecdotal; it is generated by rigorous and systematic application of the scientific method, and the results are objectively and critically reviewed before acceptance.

scruffing

Using one hand to pick up the rabbit at the ‘scruff’ (back of the neck), while supporting the back legs with the other hand.

shelter

Cover or protection from weather including sun, rain, wind, and snow.

veterinarian

A person who is registered under the Veterinarians Act 2005 and holds a current practising certificate.

veterinary nurse

A person who holds a veterinary nursing qualification recognised by the New Zealand Veterinary Nurses’ Association (NZVNA).

zoonoses

Diseases that are transmissible from animals to humans.



APPENDIX II:

Assessment of Body Condition of Rabbits

Score 1	Very thin (More than 20 % below ideal body weight)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">> Hip bones, ribs, and spine are sharp to the touch> Loss of muscle and no fat cover> The rump area curves in
Score 2	Thin (Between 10-20 % below ideal body weight)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">> Hip bones, ribs, and spine are easily felt> Loss of muscle and very little fat cover> Rump area is flat
Score 3	Ideal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">> Hip bones, ribs, and spine easily felt but are rounded> No abdominal bulge> Rump area is flat
Score 4	Overweight (10-15 % above ideal body weight)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">> Pressure is needed to feel the ribs, spine, and hip bones> Some fat layers> Rump is rounded
Score 5	Obese (More than 15 % above ideal body weight)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">> Very hard to feel the spine and hip bones. Ribs can't be felt.> Tummy sags with obvious fat padding> Rump bulges out

Information from the: <https://www.pfma.org.uk/rabbit-size-o-meter>



APPENDIX III:

Signs of Ill Health

The signs of ill health in rabbits may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Abnormal dullness or lethargy, abnormal agitation/excitement, or seizures.
- An unexplained increase or decrease in thirst or appetite
- Diarrhoea or 'sticky bottom' from over-produced caecotrophs
- Persistent bleeding from an orifice (e.g., mouth, nose, genitals, or anus)
- Bleeding that continues for more than two minutes from a skin wound
- Straining to pass urine or faeces
- Change in urine colour or cloudiness
- Persistent sneezing, persistent coughing, or persistent abnormal breathing
- Lameness, unsteady gait, or inability to stand or walk
- Significant weight loss or weight gain, or change in the girth of the rabbit
- Swellings or lumps (presence of jaw abscesses)
- Failure to groom
- Persistent scratching or biting of the skin, or persistent shaking of the head
- Presence of scabs without incidence of known injury
- Unpleasant smell from ears
- Weeping or inflamed eyes
- Body heat
- Wet chin or drooling
- Difficulty breathing or discharge from the nose
- Abnormal posture, such as hunched posture or puffed fur
- Disorientation
- Freezing and staring into space for an abnormal length of time, while being unresponsive to touch and sound (silent seizure)
- Persistent tilt of head or loss of balance (wry neck)
- Persistent bruxing (grinding of teeth)
- Change in droppings e.g., smaller, darker, denser is a sign of potential gut problems
- Wounds on the bottom of feet e.g., sore hocks
- Overgrown nails

