

# **Basic Rabbit Management & Nutrition**

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**ARBA Judge**



# Mike's Background

- **Started raising rabbits in 1966 (4H)**
- **Started showing rabbits in 1969**
- **ARBA Board of Directors 2003-2007**
- **Chairperson – ARBA Standards Committee 2007 - 2010**
- **ARBA President 2010 - 2014**

# Rabbit Production

- **meat**
- **fur**
- **wool**
- **pets**
- **exhibition and showing**
- **laboratory animals**

# Economics of Raising Rabbits

- **There are commercial rabbit operations**
- **They tend to be confined to southern Missouri and Arkansas**
- **Being able to raise a consistent supply of rabbits year round is always a challenge for the commercial producer**







# Pets









# Breeds of Rabbits

- Range from 2 lbs to 20+ lbs



- Lifespan
  - Generally dependant on size (smaller breeds live longer)
  - In production (2-3 years)
  - Pets (5-7+ years)

# Housing/Environmental Requirements



# Rabbit Facilities

- Proper ventilation
- Sprinkler or fogger for hot weather
- Adequate cage size
- Doe 30x36x18
- Buck 30x30x18
- Wood vs. Wire cages





# Feeding Rabbits



# Feeding and Nutrition

- Rabbit will eat 3-4% of its body weight
- Feed is the single biggest expense to a rabbit owner
- Best time to feed is in the evenings, however will adjust to a schedule.
  - More importantly :Feed at the same time every day

# Basic Feeding Issues

- **15% - 18% protein – % fiber generally a couple of percentage points higher**
- **Feed must be fresh**
- **Amount to feed – limit feeding vs. full feeding**
- **Commercial supplements, sunflower seeds, oats, barley, corn**
- **Benefits of grass hay**



# **Natural Diet and Feeding Strategy of the Rabbit**

- **succulent, low fiber forage**
- **a low starch diet; not a seed eater**
- **nibbler vs. meal-eater**



# **Roles of Fiber in Rabbit Nutrition**

- **growth**
- **Helps prevent fur chewing**
- **enteritis**
- **cecal impaction**



# Fur Chewing

- **nutritional causes**
  - low indigestible fiber
  - low protein

# How much should you feed?

- **Basic rule of thumb – one cup (6 oz.) of feed per day for a commercial rabbit**
  - Commercial rabbit is a 9-12 lb. rabbit
- **Dwarf breeds – ¼ cup per day**
- **Giant breeds – 2 cups per day**
- **Varies with individual animals**



# Feeding amounts

- **Kindling doe – 2-3 oz first day, increase by 1 oz/day to free choice feeding at 4-5 day.**
- **Lactating doe with kits – free choice**
- **Weaned Doe – 4-6 oz to condition**
- **Gestating Doe – 4-6 oz to condition**
- **Breeding Buck – 4-6 oz to condition**
- **Dry Doe – 4-6 oz to condition**
- **Grower Fryer Rabbits – free choice**
- **Show – 3-6 oz to condition**

# Feed intake

- **Decreases in hot weather**
- **Reasons rabbits go off feed**
  - **Palatability – feed is old, contaminated by rodents or insects, dehy differences**
  - **Wool/fur block**
  - **Changes in bacterial population – bacterial toxins by abrupt feed changes, infections, internal parasites, and stress**

# Salt - Water

- Modern feeds contain an adequate amount of salt – no salt spools are needed
- A constant supply of water is critical – rabbits won't eat if they can't drink
  - Very critical if you live in an area where the water freezes in the winter

# Conclusions

**Rabbits have numerous unique nutritional characteristics**

- **high urinary Ca**
- **low vitamin D requirements**
- **low fiber digestibility**
- **Cecotrophy**
- **very susceptible to digestive disturbance**
- **their basic feeding strategy is nibbling on low-fiber forage**
- **they are not seed eaters**
- **digestive disturbances (enteritis) are the inevitable result of seed (grain)-containing diets**



# Cecotrophy

- Cecotrophy is defined as the normal behavior of rabbits to eat their own feces.
- This behavior is a source of nutrition, primarily vitamins and minerals from partially digested plant material<sup>l</sup>
- Cecotropes, also called 'night feces' or 'soft feces,' are the material resulting from the fermentation of food in a part of the digestive system. This material is rich in protein, usually softer than normal feces and also contains high levels of vitamins K and B. Cecotropes are formed by reverse peristalsis within the cecum and are passed during resting periods.

# Questions???

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