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.
- 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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