

The Rabbit as a Meat Producing Animal

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Rabbit production is now a minor agricultural enterprise throughout the world. It is most highly developed in Western European countries such as France, Italy and Spain. Rabbits are also raised in large numbers in China, which is the main exporter of rabbit meat. Increasing quantities of Chinese rabbit meat are being imported into the United States.

Rabbits have a number of attributes which may result in their importance increasing in the future. They have the potential to become a major livestock species. This article will briefly review some of these attributes, and present some of the problems which currently prevent this potential from being realized.

Some of the attributes of the rabbit as a livestock species are:

1. Rabbits can be fed high forage, low grain diets that are largely noncompetitive with human food requirements.
2. Rabbits utilize forage protein very efficiently.

3. Rabbits have a high feed conversion efficiency, with feed/gain ratios of 2-2.3 on high grain diets, and 3-3.8 on high forage, grain-free diets.
4. They have a high growth rate, similar to that of broiler chickens, reaching market weight (4-4.5 lbs) at 8 weeks of age.
5. Rabbits have the potential of being in a constant state of reproduction; they can be rebred within 24 hours of parturition.
6. There is a high degree of genetic diversity for productive traits, so that selection and breeding programs have the potential for a rapid rate of improvement.
7. Rabbit meat is a high quality, nutritious product.
8. Rabbits are suited to both small scale (backyard, self-sufficiency) and to large scale commercial production.

The ability of rabbits to utilize high forage diets efficiently is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Performance of weanling rabbits fed high alfalfa diets (Pote et al., 1980)

% Dietary alfalfa	% Corn replaced by alfalfa	Average daily gain(g)	Average daily intake(g)	Feed/gain	Daily DE intake (Kcal)	Mortality (%)
0	0	31.4 ^a	84.2 ^a	2.7	310	20
10	10.1	44.0 ^b	107.5 ^b	2.4	374	20
20	21.7	36.6 ^{ab}	105.3 ^b	2.9	350	10
30	36.2	40.1 ^{ab}	110.4 ^b	2.8	349	70
40	50.7	36.4 ^{ab}	115.8 ^b	3.2	344	10
50	65.2	41.1 ^b	130.9 ^c	3.2	365	10
60	79.7	37.3 ^{ab}	134.3 ^{cd}	3.6	349	10
74	100	38.2 ^{ab}	147.6 ^d	3.9	346	0

Means followed by different superscripts differ significantly (P < 0.05).

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In this study (Pote et al., 1980), the complete replacement of grain with alfalfa did not reduce average daily gain. Gain was lowest on the low fiber, high energy corn-soy diet with no alfalfa added. Even with a diet containing 74% alfalfa, the feed/gain ratio was less than 4. Values for poultry, swine or cattle fed a grain-free high alfalfa diet would probably be much higher, and in the case of growing swine and poultry, performance with a 74% alfalfa diet would be extremely poor. The ability of rabbits to use high forage diets may be particularly important in tropical developing countries. Harris

teritis syndrome is if you full feed a rabbit continuously, they're liable to die. So the things we are studying are methods for feeding a rabbit so you can automate and not be concerned with death loss.

Kinsman: What has been the acceptance of the term, *cunie* meat?

Patton: Not very well. Most people still refer to it as rabbit meat, even though we have suggested that the name be changed a number of times. You may recall that before the truth in selling laws came in, the rabbit coat was called a CONIE. *Cuney* might be a take off from that same idea, but people are still calling it rabbit meat.

Kauffman: I would like to know your philosophical answers to the animal rights people concerning this issue of rabbit for food?

Patton: I guess I would ask you what your philosophical comments concerning beef for food or chickens for food.

Kauffman: I asked first.

Patton: Well, certainly if you view it from a livestock point of view, it's the same. If you view it from a pet point of view,

then, of course, it's different. We are desperately trying to promote this from the standpoint of livestock. As I mentioned, that picture we used for promotion actually didn't do us any good.

Zobrisky: Whatever happened to this company called FUNK Incorporated here in Washington state.

Patton: They have gone out of business. They had some very interesting ideas, but the person who had the ideas didn't know how to raise rabbits.

References

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