

RABBITS

Code of practice
for
keeping rabbits
in
Western Australia

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PREFACE

The **Code of practice for keeping rabbits in Western Australia** is based on *The Australian Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals - Rabbits* and has been adapted for use in Western Australia. The original *Model Code* was prepared for the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management (SCARM) and endorsed by the Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand (ARMCANZ) for use as a national code. It was prepared in consultation with the relevant industry organizations and State agencies.

This code has been prepared to assist all persons handling or using rabbits in Western Australia, and reference to this code is made in Regulations provided under Section 25 of the *Animal Welfare Act 2002* for the purposes of a defence against cruelty. It is not intended to be used for either audit or compliance purposes.

This Western Australian version of the code is supported by the livestock industries and the Department of Agriculture. It is based on current knowledge and technology. It will be reviewed in the future on a needs basis, to take account of advances in the understanding of animal physiology and behaviour, technological changes in animal husbandry and their relationship to the welfare of animals.

For anyone using animals for scientific purposes, as defined in the *Animal Welfare Act 2002*, this code should be read and used in conjunction with the “scientific use code”.

Further copies of this code are available from the Department of Local Government and Regional Development or from the internet at: <http://www.dlgrd.wa.gov.au>

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1. INTRODUCTION

This Code of Practice is intended as a guide for all persons responsible for the intensive husbandry of domestic-type rabbits for commercial production. It recognises that the basic requirement for the welfare of rabbits is a husbandry system appropriate to their physiological and behavioural needs. The basic needs are:

- (i) accommodation which provides protection from the elements and does not harm or cause undue discomfort;
- (ii) freedom of movement to stand, stretch, turn around and lie down;
- (iii) readily accessible food and water;
- (iv) rapid recognition and treatment of injury and disease.

This code is based on the knowledge and technology available at the time of publication, and may need to be varied in the light of future knowledge. It does not replace the need for experience and commonsense in the husbandry of animals, and for professional judgement and care where necessary. Responsibility and competent supervision is an essential prerequisite for the day to day management of rabbits and to ensure their welfare. It should be supplemented by expert opinion and veterinary care if the rabbits are in ill-health.

2. ENVIRONMENT

The building in which the rabbits are housed should be constructed to allow for controlling the extremes of temperature. It is recommended that temperature be maintained within the optimum range of 10°C - 25°C.

If the building is enclosed, it should be adequately ventilated; if necessary force-ventilation should be installed to prevent excessive build-up of heat, moisture and ammonia.

A force-ventilation system should have an automatic alarm system to warn of power failure. A back-up alarm system to warn of temperature increase is also essential and should operate through an alternative circuit to the power failure alarm system. In force-ventilated buildings, emergency ventilation systems should be provided.

All electrical switching should be of a non-sparking design or installed outside the animal holding area. Internal surfaces of the animal holding area should be smooth to limit the accumulation of dust and fluff.

3. SPACE REQUIREMENTS

The floor area provided for the rabbits should be sufficient to allow the rabbits to move around, to feed and drink without difficulty, and to lie on their sides.

Minimum allowances for space are:

Doe and litter to 5 weeks of age	0.56 m ² total area
Doe and litter to 8 weeks of age	0.74 m ² total area
Rabbits 5–12 weeks	0.07 m ² per rabbit
Rabbits 12 weeks and over (other than those used for breeding) in cages or other areas in which several rabbits are kept	0.18 m ² per rabbit
Adult does and bucks for breeding	0.56 m ² per rabbit

The above minimum space allowances refer to medium-sized rabbits, e.g. NZ white.

Where larger or smaller sized rabbits are involved, space allowances should be adjusted appropriate to relative body size.

Cages for rabbits over 12 weeks old should be not less than 45 cm high and should be of sufficient height to allow rabbits to sit upright with ears fully erect.

4. EQUIPMENT

Floors on which rabbits are kept should be designed, constructed and maintained so that injury or distress is not caused to rabbits. Floors should be smooth and well supported. The provision of a solid non-absorbent board may assist to minimise injury. Such board should be of not less than 0.1 m² to occupy up to one third of the total floor area of each cage. Such boards should be replaced or cleaned and disinfected regularly. Wooden or other absorbent surfaces are not recommended. Boards may increase urine staining.

If the floor is of wire mesh material it should be of woven or flat construction. Flat mesh is preferable as it is more easily cleaned. Square mesh should not exceed 19 x 19 mm or 13 x 13 mm for kittens and rectangular mesh 50 x 13 mm. The wire of the mesh should be not less than 2.5 mm diameter (12 gauge).

A special space with nesting material is required for does. Where used, nest boxes should be introduced at least 2 days before the litter is due.

5. FOOD AND WATER

The diet should be nutritionally adequate to maintain health and vitality and should take account of the requirements for growth, pregnancy and lactation and the rabbits' special need for adequate fibre-content.

Feeding and watering equipment should be designed and installed so as to avoid causing discomfort, distress or injury to the rabbits.

Food hoppers with insufficiently large openings may discourage rabbits from eating and may cause injury to their faces. If the openings are too large, kitten rabbits may enter them and defecate on the food. Hoppers that are placed too high may be out of reach of young kittens. Hoppers that are positioned too low may become contaminated with faeces and urine.

When there are several rabbits in one cage being fed on a system which restricts the supply of feed, the feed containers should be of such a size that all rabbits in the group can feed at the same time. Otherwise the dominant rabbits will eat more than their share of feed.

Clean water must be readily available to the rabbits at all times. An automated watering system reduces the risk of contamination by urine, faeces, fur and airborne disease organisms. Drinking nipples should not be positioned too high or too low, but at about 10 cm from the floor of the cage; they should not project more than 2.5 cm into the cage. Food hoppers and waterers should be checked each day to ensure that they are operating effectively. There should be a back-up system to ensure that the rabbits continue to have access to water if an automated system should break down.

6. HANDLING

Mixing established groups of unfamiliar rabbits should be avoided. Where several rabbits are kept in one large cage or other enclosure, the social stability of these groups will be seriously upset if other rabbits are introduced into the system. Such introductions will lead to savage fighting until a new hierarchical structure is established in the group.

A rabbit should never be lifted by the ears alone. It may be lifted by grasping with one hand the loose skin over the shoulders, and placing the other hand under the rabbit's rump to support its weight.

The nails of adult rabbits may have to be trimmed periodically to prevent them catching on the wire mesh of a cage.

Shearing, where necessary, should be carried out in a manner causing minimal stress to the animal.

Replacement bucks should be housed individually after 10-12 weeks of age.

For mating purposes does should be taken to the buck rather than the reverse.

7. HEALTH

Persons responsible for the care of rabbits should be watchful for the signs of ill health. Rabbits should be inspected at least once daily except that litters under 1 week old should be disturbed as little as possible. Lighting should be adequate to enable detection of any problems.

Ailing or injured rabbits should be treated promptly. They should be segregated to a quarantine area if possible. If necessary, they should be humanely destroyed. The provision of hay or paper on the floor will assist in the treatment of foot injuries.

If the person in charge of the rabbits is not able to identify the causes of ill health and correct them, specialist advice should be sought. Records should be kept of treatments given, responses to treatments, and mortalities to assist investigations of disease.

Dead rabbits should be removed and disposed of promptly and hygienically.

8. PROTECTION

Rabbits should be protected from predators and from harassment by other animals.

The area in which the rabbits are kept should be maintained free of feral rabbits and rodents. Insect proofing may be desirable to protect rabbits from myxomatosis.

Sufficient fire-fighting equipment must be available to control a fire in the area where the rabbits are kept.

9. TRANSPORT

Containers for transporting rabbits should be ventilated and large enough to allow the animals to turn around and lie down, but small enough to prevent bruising.

Containers should be designed and maintained to allow rabbits to be put in and taken out without injury.

Precautions should be taken to protect the rabbits from wind and rain and from excessively cold or hot conditions during transportation.

Rabbits should not be held in transit for more than 24 hours unless they are provided with food and water.

10. EUTHANASIA

When necessary, rabbits should be destroyed humanely by a competent handler. Where it can be performed competently, cervical dislocation is an acceptable method.