



UNP-0080

# Fundamentals of Meat Rabbit Production

## Rabbit Production 101

Entry into meat rabbit production without a sufficient knowledge base can result in frustration or failure. There are some fundamental guidelines to becoming a successful rabbit producer. A producer with a strong knowledge base is more likely to be a successful producer.

Rabbit production has four fundamental requirements: small tracts of land, accommodations, rabbits, and supplies. If you already have several acres and a small barn (20'x30') with electricity and water, you can readily begin production with 20 does (female rabbits) and 2 bucks (male rabbits), 30 individual cages, and feeders and waterers for less than \$1,200. This also includes the purchase of feed, and a few other inexpensive items. In case you are wondering why the number of cages exceeds the number of rabbits, it is because rabbits will eventually multiply and need extra space.

## Land

Rabbit production requires minimal land and can be done in outlying urban or rural areas. Three guidelines for adequate land: (1) Sufficient land space to provide space between your operation and neighbors. Neighbors will not appreciate any odor coming from your rabbitry and excess noise from neighbors can stress your rabbits. (2) An ideal proximity with sufficient distance from you and your neighbor's house to compost rabbit manure without vapors becoming a nuisance. (3) Land requirements will vary depending on size of rabbitry, composting ability, and sanitation

practices. A half-acre will suffice for five to ten rabbits.

The larger your production system, the greater the land space required.



## Accommodations

A simple pole barn with drop-down sides can provide adequate housing for rabbit production. During the winter, a pole barn may need to be enclosed with drop-down tarps to provide protection from wind, precipitation, and cold temperatures. A semi-enclosed barn is better for protection during inclement weather conditions. To avoid heat stress or rabbits becoming chilled the roof and exterior walls need to shelter the rabbits from direct sunlight or precipitation. Strong winds can become a negative factor in cold or wet conditions. An abandoned poultry barn or hog parlor is also good, or a small shed will suffice during the beginning stages of rabbit production. A 30 x 30 foot barn is a good size to produce fewer than 50 does and bucks. Having a pre-existing building on your land will help minimize fixed costs and enhance profitability of your operation.

Access to fresh, clean water in or near the barn will make your job easier and benefit your rabbits. Carrying water over long distances is tiring, and rabbits need clean water all the time. Don't forget that water freezes and young rabbits can too.

Ventilation and access to electricity for fans and lights are essential. Ventilation is important for several reasons. (1) Rabbits do not cope with excess heat and humidity so ventilation and ability to move air with fans is crucial to preventing heat stress. (2) Ventilation helps control the incidence of disease and other heat-related problems. (3) Excessive accumulation of urine, feces, and water on the ground can vaporize and cause respiratory irritation, disease, and mortality. The strong odor of urine irritates the esophagus and lung tissue of rabbits and humans. Spreading hydrated lime or vinegar under the cages will help neutralize urine and its odor.

The provision of electricity and lights make it more convenient to check on rabbits during the longer nights of winter, when noise disturbances occur any time of the year, and for checking on kits (newborns) during night or below or near freezing weather.

## Breeds

Rabbits are generally classified according to size, weight, and type of pelt. Small rabbits weigh 2 to 5 pounds at maturity; medium breeds weigh 5 to 8 pounds; and large breeds weigh an average of 8 to 12 pounds. New Zealand and Californian rabbits are the most popular breeds for meat production. While other breeds are used, the New Zealand and Californian breeds have a higher meat-to-bone ratio. They are also very popular because their fur is mostly white, which processors generally prefer as dark hair shows up on light-colored meat. A suggested stocking rate of 1 buck per 10-15 does should work for novice producers. Cross-breeding Californian, New Zealand and other medium breeds will result in hybrid vigor, a more "hearty" rabbit that tends to be healthier and grows out quicker. Remember to keep your source of full-blood breeding stock. Each production and management plan will vary depending on individual goals.



*Young New Zealand Rabbit*



*Californian Rabbit*

## Cages

Cages are essential and options may vary depending on your farm management needs. Each rabbit must be kept in a separate cage to avoid fighting. Rabbits are territorial and living in crowded conditions may cause them to become aggressive with each other. Cages are sold individually or in sets. The number of cages per set varies from two to six. Cages need to be off the ground, set on frames or saw horses, or hung from the ceiling. Hanging from the ceiling allows easy access to clean underneath the cages.

Cage sizes vary depending on your preference and size of the rabbits. A medium-size cage per rabbit should be approximately 24 x 30 inches. An adequate size cage allows for a nesting box and enough space for a doe and her litter. The nesting box is placed in a cage long enough to allow a doe to kindle (give birth) and provide housing for the young rabbits until they are weaning age. Materials are available for you to build your own cages, or you can buy them from other rabbit producers who build cages to sell.

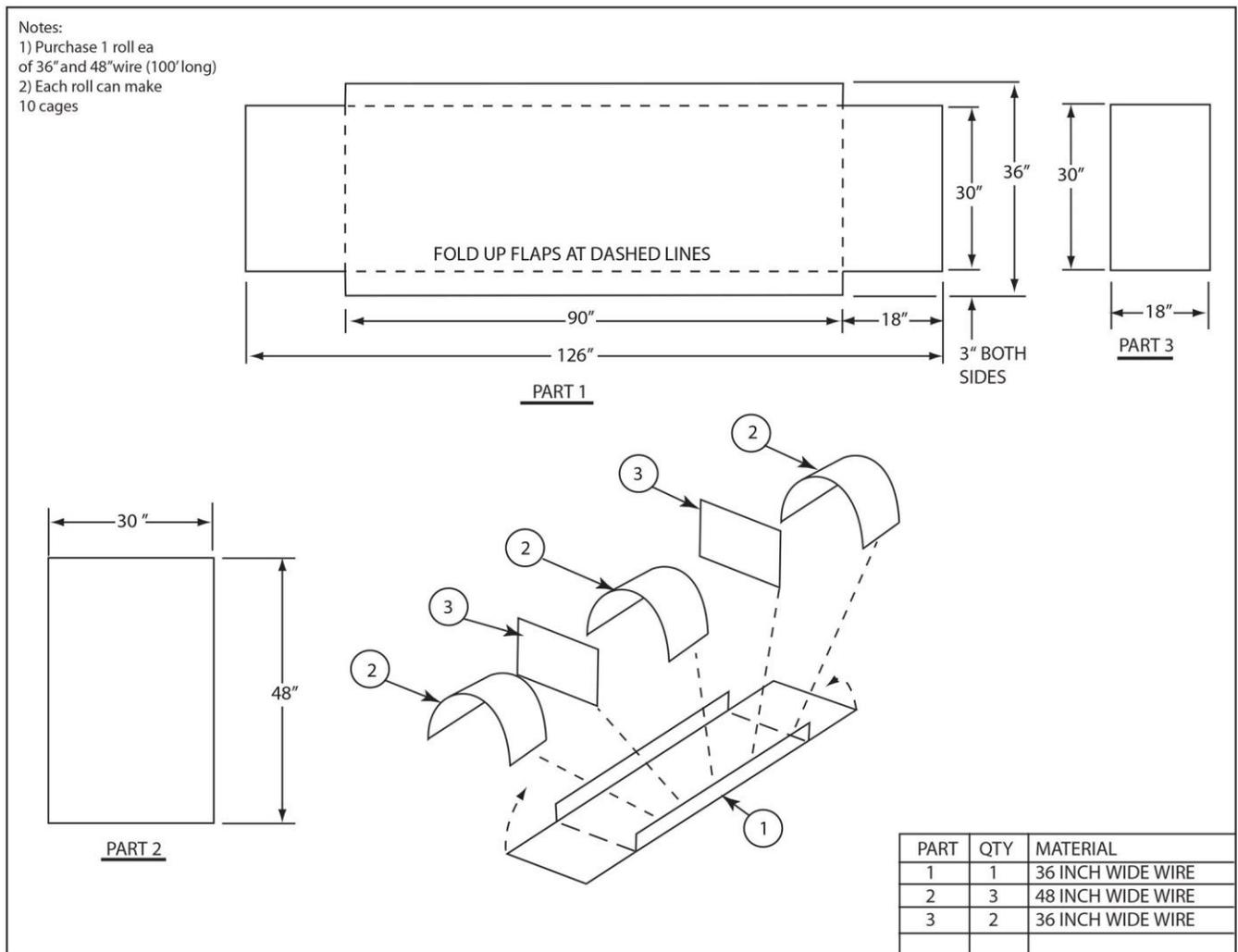


**Figure 1.** Wire cages



**Figure 2.** Wood cages and bamboo (at rogit)

**Figure 3.** Plan for wire rabbit cages [Sydne Spencer].



## Accessories

Accessories needed for rabbit production include feeders, water dispensers, resting mats, and kindling boxes. You will also need time. Feeders are often made of perforated metal, come in several sizes, and hang on the outside of the cage. Prices depend on size and vary from \$4 to \$8. Watering equipment comes in two forms: water bottles that hang on the side of a cage and gravity feed water lines that are less labor intensive. The water bottles with hangers cost about \$6 each and must be filled frequently. A gravity feed watering system is affordable and easy to set up. All it requires is a water source, a 5-gallon bucket, water lines (similar to those used in the poultry industry), and a drip water spout that attaches to the side of the rabbit cage. You can buy all of these accessories at a farmers' cooperative or feed store.

## Feed

Rabbit chow is available at your local farmers cooperative or at most feed stores. A 50-pound bag of rabbit feed costs about \$10-12. Using feed specially formulated for rabbits is recommended with expectations to meet their dietary needs. Focus on using rabbit chow. The feed used should provide a protein level of 16-18%. Supplemental feed can include hay, steam-rolled oats and barley, and black oil sunflower seed. Rabbits can eat small amounts of turnips, greens, other vegetables, fruits, etc. Be very conservative when feeding any vegetables



*Watering bottles and other equipment.*

or fruits with high water content as they can cause diarrhea. Rabbits will dehydrate and die.

## Conclusion

As you work your way into the rabbit industry, remember that learning is an ongoing process. Progress will come as you learn from other producers, personal experience, and outreach activities. Other relevant Extension publications include *UNP-0082: Summer Heat & Rabbit Production*, *UNP-100: Winter Challenges for Rabbit Production*, *UNP-140: Biosecurity for Meat Rabbit Production* and *UNP-0142: Rabbit Cuisine: A Healthy Alternative and Culinary Delight*. *UNP-0126: Small-Scale Commercial Rabbit Production* is also a good resource, as well as *Rabbit Production* (8th ed.) by James McNitt.



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