

Winter Challenges for Rabbit Producers

Introduction

Cold winter days can present challenges for potential and novice rabbit producers. For example, temperatures that are near freezing for extended periods of time and moderate to strong winds that lower wind chill temperatures can pose serious problems for newborn, young, and adult rabbits depending on the type of rabbitry or building structure in which they are housed. Familiarity with preventative measures and a few practical management implementations can help rabbit producers overcome the challenges of winter.

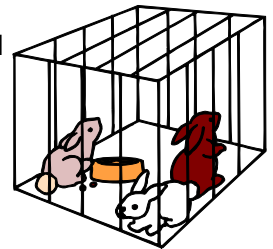
Challenges

1. Cold temperatures affect the availability of water, particularly for newborn and young rabbits. With wind or a continuous strong breeze, even the best of shelters may not be adequate enough to keep water supplies from freezing. A lack of water for several hours will not cause problems. However, rabbits could become dehydrated if water is unavailable for more than 8 hours.

No matter what type of water supply rabbit producers use, all water bottles, lines, and water nipples are susceptible to freezing during extremely cold temperatures. Once water lines are frozen, they are not easily thawed unless temperatures rise above freezing. Frozen water nipples are even more difficult to thaw, and frozen water inside the nipple can expand and damage the nipple so it cannot control the flow of water. Frozen water bottles and nipples take a long time to thaw because of the volume of water in the bottle. Anticipating freezing temperatures, taking preventative measures, and planning for alternative water supplies will minimize the potential for complications.

2. Keeping newborn and very young rabbits alive during the winter can be challenging. Kits or newborn rabbits do not have enough fur or do not generate enough body heat to insulate themselves from cold temperatures and chilling winds. Many options to protect these bunnies are available.
3. Adequate nutrition also plays a role in survivability of newborn and young rabbits. Does must provide milk for newborn and young rabbits so they can try to generate their own body heat. A well-nourished rabbit is better able to cope with cold conditions than a malnourished rabbit is.
4. During the winter months, rabbit producers also encounter reproductive management problems. Rabbits need to reproduce as often as possible, but freezing temperatures can kill bunnies. Effectively managing reproduction and newborn bunnies during winter requires exploring options, innovation, and implementation. Newborns and young kits can be protected from cold weather by nest boxes inside individual cages.

Farm managers must monitor the water supply and newborn or young rabbits to ensure that the applied measures are working.



Solutions

To offset cold and wind

It is important to properly enclose rabbitries and buildings to protect the animals from cold temperatures and wind. Enclosing the structures with temporary or permanent siding is a viable solution. In most cases, temporary siding can be removed when warmer temperatures return, which allows for necessary air-flow during the summer months. Permanent siding requires additional adaptations to handle summer heat. Another option is to

purchase rolls of heavy-duty plastic that can be attached to the outside of most buildings, taken down after winter passes, and stored and reused next winter.

To protect water supply

The options to protect either flexible water lines or polyvinylchloride water lines from freezing are limited. These lines are unlikely to break during freezing temperatures and will thaw as the outside temperatures rise. However, water nipples are prone to freezing, and the expansion of the frozen water may damage them. Water nipples are fairly inexpensive and easy to replace. Water bottles are often used in place of water lines with nipples during the winter months. To cope with frozen water bottles, there are two options: (1) bring the water bottles into a warm building, give them time to thaw, and then re-hang the thawed water bottles; or (2) have a surplus of water bottles so the frozen water bottles can be replaced with fresh water bottles while they are thawing.

Keeping baby and young rabbits alive during the winter months is one of the biggest challenges that rabbit producers face. The potential for hypothermia or death can be avoided in most situations. Providing kits or young bunnies with adequate shelter and protection will help eliminate problems. A sheltered structure is crucial to providing protection. Nest boxes, lined with mixed wood shavings, rabbit fur (the mother rabbit pulls this during the kindling process), dryer lint, or other insulating

material, are essential to protecting vulnerable kits or bunnies. In extreme cold, sheets of plastic can be placed over the tops of cages to hold in the body heat generated by the rabbits in each cage.

Summary

Meat rabbit production, as any livestock production, requires extensive management practices during the winter months. Rabbit producers must anticipate freezing and sub-freezing temperatures, implement preventative measures, and be able to improvise solutions. Providing adequate shelter, preventing water supplies from freezing, and ensuring adequate warmth for newborn and young rabbits are necessary to care for rabbits. Given the limited opportunity for profitability, supplemental heating is probably not feasible. However, exterior siding on a building will protect both young and adult rabbits from wind, cold temperatures, and precipitation.

A well-protected inside watering system will help keep water sources from freezing and possibly damaging materials. While individual water bottles are an option for small-scale producers, that option is cost prohibitive for large-scale producers. Adult rabbits and rabbits around weaning age have the ability to maintain an adequate body temperature during colder temperatures, but newborn and young rabbits do not. Be sure to approach winter challenges carefully. Management options will vary from farm to farm.



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