

Summer Heat and Rabbit Production

► Summer heat affects rabbit production. Follow these tips to avoid heat stress and breeding problems with rabbits.

Introduction

Novice rabbit producers need to be aware of summer heat and the challenges it presents in managing rabbit production. Even experienced producers may be unaware of the heat stress placed on rabbits as a result of warm summer temperatures from June through August. Therefore, it is best to plan the breeding season during the spring, fall, and winter months.

Problems

Rabbits do not cope well in temperatures above 90 °F. and in high humidity. Their fur coat does not easily allow them to regulate body heat. Ideal temperatures for rabbits range from 50 to 60 °F. When breeding rabbits during the summer months, it is best to implement a cooling system that will allow your herd to successfully increase.

Heat stress can cause sterility among bucks. As a result of heat, does may not reproduce. Instead they could miscarry, abort their young, ignore the newborn, or deliver outside the nest box on the wire floor rather than in the next box. Rabbits can also die from heat stress, which results in high mortality rates. However, heat stress can be prevented through methods that are fairly inexpensive and can be readily implemented.

Since livestock and poultry producers also deal with summer heat stress and reproductive management, a rabbit producer may benefit from their advice when developing an appropriate management plan for their rabbit operation. Regardless of whether a producer chooses to idle breeding stock during the summer, he or she still needs to implement a cooling system to keep the rabbits comfortable.

It is beneficial for a rabbit farm to give the rabbits a break from summer reproduction. If you wait until the first of September to allow rabbits to breed, they will kindle towards the end of the month when temperatures have begun to cool off and does are most likely to cope with the heat, carry to term, and take good care of their young.



Figure 1. Rabbits on rabbit farm. iStock image by Oxana Medvedeva.

This also reduces the mortality rate among rabbits.

Solutions

Fans are one option for keeping rabbits comfortable during the summer heat. To avoid stressing the rabbits, do not allow the fans to blow directly on them. Instead, hang the fans above the rabbit cages and direct them to keep air moving above the cages; this not only will help the rabbits cool off, but will also repel diseased flies. Many rabbit farmers prefer box fans over heavy duty, industrial fans since only a slight movement of air is necessary. Ceiling fans are a good option.

With available freezer space, a surplus of empty soft drink bottles filled with frozen water can provide a primitive air conditioner for your rabbits. Be sure to remove the paper off the bottle before putting it in with your rabbits. Rabbits will get bored, pull the paper off, then play with it. Once your rabbits become familiar with their individual bottles, they will lean against them for relief. Implementing this on a daily basis can be time consuming since it requires refreezing the bottles each night. However, this is an efficient, affordable method and will increase the rabbits' survival rate, thus increasing the rate of successful breeding and kindling.

Another cooling option is a mister that requires running water lines with pressurized water mister valves, and

positioning a fan to blow mist over the rabbit cages. Although such a system can be costly and the farmer must work to keep the rabbits dry, misters can be quite effective when used properly.

Yet another option for cooling rabbits is the swamp cooler. This requires fans, water, and panels of mesh material. The fans are used to send air across the water as it runs through the panels, which creates cool air for the rabbits. To locate such equipment, visit a local greenhouse, poultry producer, or poultry supply house. This is cost efficient, but excess moisture can lead to respiratory health problems.

Conclusion

The temperature control options previously mentioned are viable, practical, and easy to implement for most small-scale and resource-limited farmers. One idea not mentioned is air conditioning in enclosed facilities because it is more a luxury than a practical option. The efforts and expenses associated with establishing and operating a controlled climate for your rabbits are not practical, cost effective, or economically feasible. Also, fresh air is essential for rabbit production because it reduces the opportunity for disease and diminishes the negative effects of urine that accumulates beneath the

cages.

Because the management plan for each rabbit production operation will vary from farm to farm, each farm manager must determine what works best for his or her farm. You must manage your operation and not allow it to manage you. As a livestock manager, it is essential to minimize stress that lowers your rabbits' immune systems, making them more susceptible to illness. You may successfully breed rabbits from June through August as long as you implement a plan to keep them comfortable. Failure to do so may result in disappointment, frustration, a high mortality rate, and financial losses.

As a farm manager, you must realize that mortality does occur among livestock. Each manager must calculate possible losses and develop preventative measures. The effect of summer heat on reproductive management is just one of many issues relevant to rabbit production. As an enterprise, rabbit production is a nontraditional form of agricultural production in that it faces more risk than traditional forms. Then again, farming, by nature, is a risky business when compared with industrial enterprises.



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