



FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD

~ Rabbits ~

Overview

Rabbits are active and social animals. With proper care and nutrition, they can live 6-10 years. Rabbits raised for meat in Canada are destined for a life of confinement, over-breeding, stressful and dangerous transport, and inhumane slaughter practices.

Because rabbit farming in Canada is less organized than other animal farming, no laws or Recommended Codes of Practice exist to guide farmers on the proper care of rabbits. This means that guidelines around basic needs such as feed and water, minimum space requirements, and protection during slaughter and transport, are lacking. Most rabbit production farms use confinement-rearing practices, which translate into space restriction and social deprivation for rabbits.

Meat production

Immature rabbits, or “fryers” as they are called in the rabbit meat industry, are slaughtered for their meat when they are less than 12 weeks old. These rabbits are marketed when they weigh from three to six pounds. Adult rabbits may also be marketed for meat when they are no longer productive as breeders. Mature and old rabbits are usually eight months of age or older at the time of slaughter. These rabbits are referred to as “roasters.”

Large-scale rabbitries usually house from 100-150 does. Each doe typically produces about 30 offspring (called kits) per year. Currently, the majority of rabbit deaths occurring among kits less than 28 days of age result from starvation and chilling in commercial rabbit operations. If rabbit families are not monitored and provided with proper veterinary care, other kits can die from infectious diseases and bacteria, such as *Pasteurella* and Enterotoxemia.

Slaughter

Given the increase in the number of rabbit operations in recent years, the need for humane slaughter methods and standards for rabbits is a growing concern. The slaughter of rabbits is governed federally by the Meat Inspection Act. The legislation does not require rabbits to be rendered unconscious prior to being suspended for slaughter. This practice causes the rabbits to struggle and as a result these sensitive animals are unnecessarily terrified.



Once suspended, rabbits are made to be unconscious prior to being killed by electrocution or a blow to the head. Rabbits are then killed either by one of these methods or by a gas or gas mixture, or by rapid decapitation.

Some large commercial abattoirs process rabbits as they do chickens by first stringing rabbits up by their hind legs and dipping them in a water bath of electrical current to “stun” them. Electrical stunning is not guaranteed to render all rabbits unconscious. Rabbits that kick, move or are strung up improperly miss the electrical current bath. After stunning, rabbits are decapitated.

In some provinces, workers in small rabbit processing facilities may not be trained on how to properly render the animals unconscious, which causes more unnecessary suffering. They may either break the rabbit’s neck or provide a blunt blow to the base of the skull. After this, a knife is used to manually slice the rabbits’ throats.

Transportation and handling

Rabbits destined for slaughter are usually transported by truck to a slaughter facility. Rabbits may be physically harmed from long transportation times and may be subject to unsafe crating, food and water deprivation, extreme temperature and environmental stressors.

The rabbit meat industry would do well to ensure their rabbits are properly handled to minimize stress and harm. Stress and neglect affect the quality of rabbit meat for human consumption. Recent studies have found these stressors may cause rabbit meat to be firm and dry, in addition to causing overall weight loss of the rabbit. Meat from rabbits who have survived these stressful transports is not very marketable.

What you can do

- Do not eat rabbit meat.
- Ask restaurants and retailers serving rabbit meat to stop serving or selling it.

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