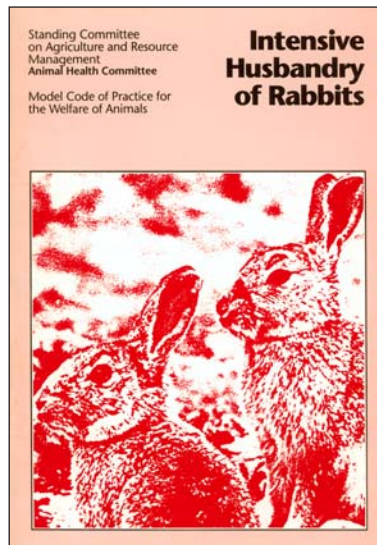


**Primary Industries Standing Committee
Model Code of Practice for the Welfare
of Animals
Intensive Husbandry of Rabbits
SCARM Report 33**



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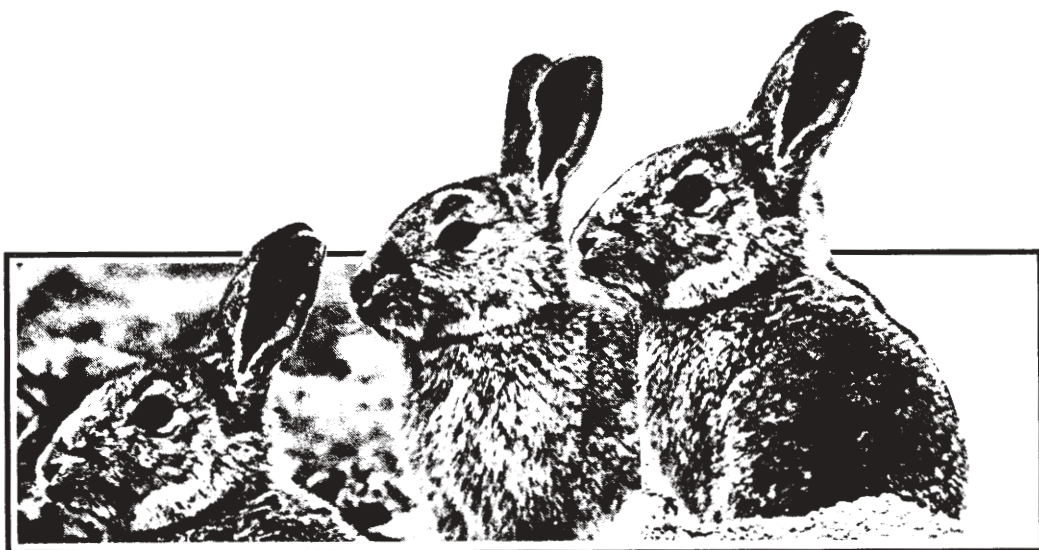
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Standing Committee on
Agriculture and Resource
Management
Animal Health Committee

Model Code of Practice for the
Welfare of Animals

Intensive Husbandry of Rabbits



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Preface

The Model Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Animals have been prepared by the Sub-Committee on Animal Welfare (SCAW) for Animal Health Committee (AHC), for Standing Committee on Agriculture (SCA).

Membership of SCAW comprises representatives from State and Federal Departments with responsibility for agriculture and/or animal welfare, CSIRO and other relevant committees within the SCA system. Extensive consultation takes place with industry and other animal welfare groups in the development of the Codes.

This Model Code of Practice was endorsed by the Australian Agricultural Council (AAC) as a national code at its 132nd meeting in July 1989.

The Codes are intended as models to enable the States to develop codes of practice to meet their individual needs. The Model Codes of Practice which have been endorsed by AAC are:

- The Pig
- The Domestic Fowl
- Road Transport of Livestock
- Rail Transport of Livestock
- Air Transport of Livestock
- Livestock and Poultry at Slaughtering Establishments
- Sea Transport of Livestock
- Animals at Saleyards
- The Goat
- The Sheep
- Intensive Husbandry of Rabbits (revised)
- The Farming of Deer
- Destruction or Capture, Handling and Marketing of
Feral Livestock Animals

The Model Codes may be revised to take account of advances in the understanding of animal physiology and behavioural technology changes in animal husbandry and their relationships to the welfare of animals.

Other Publications in this Series

Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals — The Farming of Deer	1990
Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals — Animals at Slaughterhouses	1990
Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals — The Destruction or Capture, Handling and Marketing of Feral Livestock Animals	1990
Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals — The Goat	1990
Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals — The Sheep	1990

Contents

Preface	iii
Introduction	1
1. Environment	3
2. Space Requirements	4
3. Equipment	5
4. Food and Water	6
5. Handling	7
6. Health	8
7. Protection	9
8. Transport	10
9. Euthanasia	11

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 Practice for the Welfare of Animals* 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.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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 hierarchial 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. Euthanasia

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