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on minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits

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The need for minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits

Introduction

Compared to other species, the domestication of rabbits took place relatively late (about 300 BC). Hence the needs of domestic and wild rabbits do not really differ; therefore rabbit breeding is extremely problematic in terms of animal welfare. Since rabbits are very sensitive to poor housing conditions, the mortality rate of rabbits in agricultural use is higher than in any other livestock species. Despite this mortality rate, rabbits are the fourth most farmed animal in the world and the second most farmed species in the EU with over 326 million slaughtered for meat ever year.

More than three quarters of all rabbit farming in the EU takes place in Italy, Spain and France. In terms of volume compared to total European meat production, rabbit meat is a niche product. The per capita consumption of rabbit meat in comparison to meat products from other animal species is relatively low. In Germany, the annual per capita consumption is estimated at half a kilogram. In Italy, where consumption is the highest in the EU, it is about 5.5 kilogram per person per year.

According to today's scientific evidence, rabbits are systemically kept under horrible conditions in breeding and fattening farms, despite the existence of European legal safeguards such as the Council Directive concerning the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes (1998/58/EC) and Article 13 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which states that "the Union and the Member States shall, since animals are sentient beings, pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals".

Most Member States of the Union lack specific legislation for the keeping, breeding and fattening of rabbits. However, some exceptions exist: Austria (2012, prohibition of battery cages); Belgium (2014, phasing out of cages and introduction of park systems in 2025); Germany (2014, improving animal welfare legislation specifically for rabbit farming) and the United Kingdom (2007, Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations, which has species specific requirements for rabbit farming). In the new legislative proposal for organic production currently under discussion, rabbits are to be kept in group pens, with at least 0.4 m2 of space per rabbit, and access to an outside area of pasture at the base of the pen.

There is already Union legislation in force which established minimum requirements for the protection of calves, pigs, broiler chickens and laying hens - the latter even led to a Europe-wide ban on battery cages for laying hens. Nevertheless, regulations or policies on minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits have so far not been drafted or adopted.

Goal

Through this initiative report on minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits, the European Commission should be encouraged to present an ambitious draft legislative proposal on animal welfare in rabbit farming taking on board the recommendation of the European Parliament. The proposal should aim at closing the existing loopholes that lead to serious animal welfare abuses in the keeping, breeding, husbandry, transportation and slaughtering of rabbits.

Rabbit meat farming

Most rabbits kept for meat consumption are held in so-called 'battery cages'. In a period of three to four months they reach their slaughter weight, which ranges from 1.3 to 3.3 kg. They have not even reached 1/40 of their natural life expectancy. The World Rabbit Science Association has stated that a cage floor area of 0.2 to 0.4 m2, and a cage height of 30 to 40 centimeters, should be sufficient. However in practice, rabbit farmers keep three to six rabbits inside a cage, leaving each animal only an area of maximum 0.08 m2 (this is a little bit more than one A4 piece of paper).

The small space provided per rabbit makes it impossible for the animals to satisfy their species-specific needs such as foraging, jumping, digging, running or straightening up. The animals cannot get a proper rest, because of the limited space and the nature of the surface (metal grids). Enrichment material such as straw and hay is not provided in battery cages, which are usually equipped with sharp edged metal grids that frequently lead to postural injuries (Pododermatitis colitis = festering wounds and bleeding on the legs). The low height of the cages prevents rabbits from straightening up to full height, which leads to spine curvature disorders. The cramped space and the lack of escape routes in these cages lead to enormous mental stress for the animals. This stress leads to injuries from biting, and contusions and abrasions caused by the urge to move around. Insufficient ventilation concentrates ammonia vapors from their excrements, leading to eye inflammations and respiratory diseases. These same problems occur with Angora rabbits, which are kept for their wool.

Moreover, due to the lack of stimulus, behavioral disorders often appear such as stereotyped movements, self-mutilation and even cannibalism. Loud noise that results from the stereotyped jumping of rabbits in their cages is an additional disturbance, as rabbits are inherently noise-sensitive animals.

In the wild, rabbits are very active. This is in stark contrast to the cramped cages that offer no distraction or stimulation. The barren and cramped environment leads to an increase in the monotonous food intake, which can have metabolic disorders and intestinal diseases as a result. Furthermore, in order to stimulate food intake, they are often subjected to prolonged illumination. Because of species-specific diseases (coccidiosis, RHD, myxomatosis, etc.), the high mortality rate inherent to rabbit farming and inadequate farming practices, antibiotics are used routinely in high doses.

Rabbit breeding

At the age of three to four months, female rabbits reach sexual maturity. With intensive reproduction management, they are able to give birth to up to nine kits every 33-45 days. In order to achieve such a high reproductive performance, the does are artificially inseminated shortly after giving birth. This form of reproduction management exploits the does to the extreme, resulting in slaughter after twelve months due to different disorders, but mostly due to decline in birth power.

In breeding farms, does are kept in individual cages with a nesting cavity attached to it. A typical cage for a breeding doe is between 60 to 65 centimeters long, 40 to 48 centimeters wide and 30 to 35 centimeters high. The floors of the cages are similar to the ones used in the farming of meat rabbits, which lead to the abovementioned typical injuries on the legs.

Enrichment material such as straw and hay is not provided. The small cage surface area and low height preclude the mother and her kits from engaging in their species-specific needs.

In the wild the doe can avoid constant pressure from her kits, by retreating to other areas. However, such a retreat like an elevated floor or platform usually is lacking in these intensive rearing facilities. The constant pressure causes enormous stress to the doe and the constant suckling leads to inflammation of the teats. After three to four weeks the kits are separated from the mother and after a short time the doe will give birth again.

The standard nutrition in rabbit farming is composed of industrially manufactured pellets. However, a varied diet with lots of raw fibers such as hay, straw, fresh vegetables and fruit would enhance the immune system and reduce the mortality rate significantly. Unfortunately this is not provided due to financial reasons.

Transport and slaughter

The surface area and height of the containers for the transport of fattening rabbits to other farms or slaughterhouses are generally insufficient. There are reports of rabbits being transported in cages that are only 35 cm high and have a stocking density of 15 rabbits/ 480 cm2. However, since there is currently no legal limit on the number of animals per container, it often happens that rabbits are cramped together so much that they have less than the area of an A4 page each. Often, these journeys have durations of up to twelve hours, and there are reports that rabbits are not even fed before and during transport.

In the EU, pre-slaughter stunning methods range from bolt shots to bullet shots to stunning by gas (carbon dioxide). Scientific studies have shown that the anesthetic effects of these methods are often insufficient. More than 10 percent of the rabbits are not fully stunned, having to experience their own slaughter whilst being conscious. In many slaughterhouses, rabbits have to watch other rabbits being slaughtered, causing additional stress and anxiety.

Conclusion and state of play

Rabbits are the species where animal welfare and species-specific needs are the most overlooked in the European Union. In the majority of Member States, there is no specific legislation for mandatory minimum requirements for the protection of rabbits in agriculture. The application and enforcement of European and national general animal welfare laws are insufficient. The facilities commonly used in the EU for breeding and fattening of rabbits for meat production, as well as the practices in transportation and slaughter clearly go against Council Directive concerning the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes (1998/58/EC) and Article 13 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

However Austria, Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom do have specific legislation in place concerning rabbit farming. In this context, EU legislation would ensure uniform interpretation, create a level playing field and would meet the increasing demand from consumers for better animal welfare in farming. In recent years, major European animal welfare organizations and NGOs are increasingly highlighting the subject of rabbit farming and launching campaigns for the abolition of battery cages. One can expect public pressure on this issue to increase in the near future.

An important additional consideration is that, as the use of antibiotics is a necessity in rabbit

farming, there is an increase in the development of antimicrobial resistance of bacteria. Therefore abolishing battery cages in rabbit farming is a prudent option considering the protection of public health.

Recommendations

From an animal welfare perspective, the abovementioned facts lead to the conclusion that there is a need in the EU to phase out the use of cages in rabbit farming. We should move forward and instead introduce the park system as a method of farming that respects animal health and welfare, thereby ensuring also a decent minimum standard of protection during the transport and slaughtering of rabbits. Therefore I can make the following recommendations:

- Phasing out of cages in rabbit farming, moving to park systems that provide for sufficient space per rabbit and where rabbits can be kept in groups;

- Housing systems for rabbits should have platforms or similar elevated terrain and sufficient enrichment materials;

- Housing systems for rabbits should allow eye and scent contact between rabbits, and have as low a sound level as possible. There should be species specific lighting systems;

- There should be adequate food and drink for all rabbits, so that rabbits can eat and drink at the same time;

- The groups should be not too large, with sufficient surface area for each rabbit.

- If the rabbits are sick or suffering, immediate treatment is required, followed by separation from group until they are well. Unnecessary suffering or stress should to be avoided.

- Rabbits should be fed before transport and given access to adequate food and water during transport. Transport times should be as limited as possible, due to the sensitivity of the species. Transport cages should allow for normal posturing.

- Rabbits should be fully stunned before slaughter, ensuring that there is no suffering, pain or stress. Slaughter should be without risk of the stunned animal regaining consciousness.