Ethical Vegan Earth Research Inc.

The Rabbit Meat Industry in Australia

2017

Researched and presented by
Dr Reem Lascelles
Co-Founder and Researcher at Ethical Vegan Earth Research
PHASE 1

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About Ethical Vegan Earth Research (EVER)

“Inspiring change through education”

Ethical Vegan Earth Research Inc. (EVER) is an independently funded incorporated association with no industry affiliations. We are based in Australia with an academic affiliate in Germany.

Our primary goal through EVER is to help muster support for a change in public attitude and behaviour towards animal exploitation and care for the Earth.

Our work includes (but is not limited to) the following:
• Research and publications into selected areas of agricultural and environmental topics.
• Working within and alongside the community to increase awareness of the scale and nature of the current exploitation and abuse, particularly of farm animals raised for food.
• Disseminating the science and verified facts as effectively as possible on:
  - The ethical concerns with animal agriculture.
  - The environmental benefits of moving away from animal agriculture.
  - Plant based health and nutrition.

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Forward by Philip Wollen

At Cornell University in 1994, Carl Sagan, one of the world’s greatest astrophysicists and philosophers showed a photograph taken from a tiny pin-hole in the Voyager Spacecraft of the tiniest sliver of Space, saying:

“If you look at it, you see a dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it, every human being that ever lived, lived out their lives. The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived there — on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam”.

In my mind’s eye, those captivating words are actually a love letter to our home, the only one we will ever have, “Our Pale Blue Dot, suspended in a sunbeam”.

Imagine: If the earth were as small as a beach ball and so close we could touch it. People would come from far and wide to marvel at it. We’d be fascinated by its tiny oceans, rivers and waterfalls; its mountains, valleys and meadows. Enraptured by its changing colours, seasons and its journey. Intrigued by the millions of species of animals and plants, all interconnected and interdependent. An enchanted web. We’d be in awe of each microscopic life, fitting together in a jigsaw puzzle of harmony. Each creature would be fascinating and intrinsically valuable. Every single one of them should be loved by every one of us. A sliver of precious gas would surround this globe, giving every living being oxygen to breathe. We would cherish the small and the large, the seen and the unseen, equally. We would do anything to protect it...a treasure beyond our imagination. We would not allow it to be injured or vandalised. We would touch it gently, not leaving a mark. We would nourish and we would love it. If only the earth were as small as that beach ball.

In human history, only 100 billion people have ever lived. 7 billion are alive today. And we humans torture and kill 2 billion land animals every week. We stab and suffocate 1 billion ocean animals every 8 hours. Every victim has been a fellow traveller on the long journey through the cosmos of our fragile Planet Earth, across space and time, and whose precious lives we arbitrarily chose to snuff out. Simply because we could. If humans were killed at the same rate we’d be wiped out in one weekend.

The oceans are dying in our time. By 2048 all the fisheries will be dead, the lungs and the arteries of the earth. And oceans sequester more CO2 than all the forests of the world combined. 10,000 entire species are wiped out every year because of the actions of one species, while we now face the 6th mass extinction in cosmological history.

If any other organism did this a biologist would call it a virus. It is a crime against humanity of unimaginable proportions.

Human beings comprise 30% of the mass of land animals. So called “farm” animals produced for slaughterhouses account for 66%. Wild animals dingy to the declining remnants of their natural habitat have been decimated down to 4%.

We have turned Carl Sagan’s Pale Blue Planet Earth into Bloodstained Planet Slaughterhouse.

Reem Lascelles’s masterful paper clinically illuminates another human atrocity in the making, the industrialized breeding, caging, torture and killing of the most gentle and vulnerable of sentient living animals. Her work to protect rabbits is a lightning rod, attracting attention to yet another squalid, cruel act of barbarism inflicted by the animal industrial complex on the powerless for thirty pieces of silver. Animals Rights is now the greatest Social Justice issue since the abolition of slavery. It is a revolutionary event more powerful than the Industrial Revolution, The Reformation, the Hubble telescope, or anything conceived by Galileo, Copernicus, Einstein, Darwin or Freud. Because it protects the most precious of all things. Life.

Most of us know The Golden Rule “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” from the New Testament of the Nazarene, Jesus. But it goes back to the Babylonian Jew, Hillel in 70 BCE. It actually traces back even further to the Analects of Confucius in 500 BCE. In fact, it was enshrined in the human heart long before the dawn of writing.

We sagely acknowledge and pay nodding lip service to this notion in our treatment of other human beings. Although it should be remembered that in the 20th century humans killed 200 million members of their own species and 100 million citizens were killed by their own governments. Small wonder that Tolstoy so presciently observed “As long as there are slaughterhouses, there will be battlefields”.

But there is a cognitive disconnect when it comes to our non-human animal cousins. Our critical faculties have been seduced by fad, fashion, and greed, hijacked by the animal industrial complex. To say nothing about the mendacity of their facilitators in government, lobby groups and the media.

This is not just about Animal Rights. It is also about Human Wrongs. Reem Lascelles’s report accurately describes the “welfare” conditions in the rabbit slaughter industry. But the underlying message is crystal clear. This is not an “industry”. It is an atrocity. This is a grotesque, vile abomination where cruelty and suffering is just another “cost of production” in the supply chain; where the ultimate cost is paid by the victim. In the gulf of terror where the slaughterman has absolute power, and where, as Lord Acton so pungently put it “Absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

Where Alchemy ends, Chemistry begins; where Astrology ends, Astronomy begins; where Animal Welfare ends, Animal Rights begin. These sentient animals have Rights. And the abuse of those rights is a crime.

Victor Hugo said there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. But I say there is nothing more destructive than a bad idea whose time has passed. The time for “meat” has passed.

Martin Luther King said: Cowardice asks the question ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question ‘Is it popular?’ But Conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’

We need a new kind of Jurisprudence, a New Legal System, a “Foro Conscientiae” a Court of the Conscience.

Judge White’s closing words in the “Bonfire of the Vanities” were “The Law is Humanity’s attempt at Decency”. Reem Lascelles’s paper is a clarion call to join the battle in the war that “Decency” cannot afford to lose.

Because, in the end only 3 things matter. How deeply you loved. How gently you lived. And how gracefully you let go of things that were not meant for you. Meat was not meant for you. It has no place in civilized society.

And a day will come when all sentient life will owe Reem, and others like her, a debt of gratitude it can never repay.

I can’t wait for that beautiful day to dawn.

Philip Malcolm Wollen.

Former Vice-President, Citibank. Founder, Winsome Constance Kindness Trust (Venture Capital for Good Causes)
Executive summary

The domestic rabbit is one of the most popular Australian pets after dogs and cats, yet these same rabbits are bred for their meat. What’s more, in these farms the rabbits are kept in conditions that most would consider inhumane. That is, in very small metal cages, in darkness, and without stimulation. Even the most basic opportunity to exhibit natural behaviours are denied such as the opportunity to stand straight or lie down comfortably. By any standards this is animal cruelty yet this has been the standard practice for the past three decades. Further, many of the inadequate, outdated and largely ignored laws supposedly adopted to protect companion animals from human cruelty do not apply to these rabbits as they are deemed to be “livestock”.

It is not only the life provided to these rabbits that is so concerning, it is also the violent death imposed on them. Rabbits bred for meat are sent to slaughter at the age of 10-12 weeks, a small fraction of their expected life of 8-14 years. The slaughter practices and processes followed have no definition of stunning with apparently little to no consideration whatsoever for the welfare of the animals. To make matters even worse, on-site slaughter is not uncommon where the use of equipment such as circular saws has been acknowledged as a suitable method of slaughter.

Australia’s past dependence on farming for our economic growth makes the ethics around this issue harder to confront and resolve. The rabbit has been tarnished with a reputation of being destructive and an economic burden. This has led to them being considered as “pests” rather than sentient beings deserving of our empathy. Many forget they are intelligent complex animals that feel pain with a range of emotions, and have a strong will to survive and live free as close as possible to how nature intended. There can be little doubt they suffer terribly and almost constantly for their short lives in these factory farms until it ends in a violent slaughter.

This report has been written to present facts on rabbit farming in Australia. Sources include veterinary and animal science research papers and a range of credible information obtained from undercover farm investigations. The hope is to highlight the gap between what most consider acceptable treatment of animals and the practices used in rabbit farms which are deemed by those involved to be necessary for the industry to be viable.
1.1 Introduction

This report is the first of a series of reports that investigate the practices involved in the exploitation of rabbits in Australia. Phase one is an investigation into the Australian rabbit meat industry. It offers an insight into the suffering endured by rabbits in the farms and during their slaughter. With the lack of even the most basic considerations for the suffering of these complex sentient animals it seems clear the industry is incapable of operating humanely by any definition.

The intensive rabbit farming practices, which have existed in the country since the mid-1980s, have been backed up by research conducted by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC). These battery farms are standard in most states except Queensland. Undercover investigations looking at the reality in these farms conducted over the past 15 years show that none of the basic required five freedoms of animals, as adopted by veterinarians and the World Organisation for Animal Health, are being met. Even though sales of rabbit meat have plummeted and many farms have shut down in the past few years, the three largest and oldest farms in Australia are still operating. A worrying trend for the rabbits is that celebrity chefs are rekindling the interest in rabbit meat.

Investigations by animal activist groups Freedom for Farmed Rabbits over the past 15 years and most recently Animal Liberation NSW provides with a clear picture of the reality of life on these farms. The footage from some of Australia’s oldest running and biggest rabbit battery farms shows deeply disturbing conditions and treatment of intelligent sentient animals.

Photo courtesy Animal Liberation NSW

1.2 Snapshot of Australian rabbit meat farming

1.2.1 Rabbit meat – a short history

The domesticated rabbit (Oryctolagus Cuniculus) is descended from the European rabbit. They are a small mammal who belong to the family of Lagomorphs (Hare-Form). Rabbits were introduced in Australia in 1788 with the first fleet. Their introduction was an attempt by early settlers to make Australia as “European” as possible. The reasoning behind releasing the first 24 rabbits in Geelong, Victoria, was that they would proliferate so that man could hunt them.

Initially Australia established a rabbit meat industry based on the use of wild rabbits. The wild rabbit meat (game) became a cheap staple for many in the 1930s depression years during a time of high unemployment and low consumer incomes.

Up until 1987, there was a complete ban on rabbit farming in Australia. In 1987, Western Australia changed its legislation to lift that ban. New South Wales and Victoria followed suit in 1995 and 1997 respectively, and soon all other states were farming rabbits except for Queensland. Before the bans were lifted, 2.7 million rabbits a year were estimated to have been hunted in Australia in the wild up until the early 1990s. Australia’s contribution to world rabbit meat consumption in that period (from wild rabbits) amounted to 0.02% of world consumption.

In 1996, The Australian government released the Rabbit Calicivirus Disease (RCD) as a biological control agent, to kill wild rabbits. This wiped out a large part of the wild rabbit population. As a result, the estimated number of hunted wild rabbits dropped considerably (to around 100,000 per year). This coincided with a resurgence in interest in rabbit farming in Australia.

1.2.2 Crusader project

In 1999 Crusader® was born; a collaborative project conducted by the CSIRO livestock industries and funded by the RIRDC with an aim to support the emerging farmed rabbit meat industry in Australia. This was initially a three year project and research facilities were located at the F.D. McMaster Laboratory in Armidale in New South Wales. The main objective of the project was to develop a breeding program for the meat rabbit industry with the emphasis on improving rabbit genetic breeding traits related to enterprise profitability.

1.2.2.1 Crusader phase 1

Phase 1: 1999-2002: The main goals of the first phase of Crusader between 1999-2002 were to:

i. Develop a rabbit breeding programme that selects genetic traits to maximise profitability of the rabbit farm industry.

ii. Deliver a ‘superior’ breeding stock to the meat industry by providing farmers with rabbits from the research lab.

iii. Develop a software programme to record pedigree and production data.

Four genetic traits were identified and chosen to be the main key role players in contributing to profit. These were: litter size at birth; mortality rate from birth to weaning; post-weaning weight gain and the feed conversion ratio of grower rabbits (g of feed/g of growth).

A breeding facility was established at the CSIRO F.D. McMaster Laboratory in late 1999. It was used to accommodate 120 does (female rabbits) and 30 bucks (male rabbits) with the main aim of genetic selection.

Crusader scientists evaluated the most common breeds of rabbits available in Australia (New Zealand White, Californian and Flemish Giant), and some of their crosses. A decision was made to develop a composite strain of rabbits based on the Crusader breeding program by selecting the best individual rabbits irrespective of breed. The main objectives were to maximise the rate of genetic progress and minimise inbreeding.

Some facts about the Crusader programme are:

- A weekly mating schedule was undertaken by introducing does at 18-19 weeks of age to random buck families.
- Note that the expertise of Artificial Insemination was not well established back then.
- Weekly weighing recorded for all grower rabbits up to 10 weeks of age.
- Rabbits were sent to slaughter at 12-13 weeks of age.
- Mature does were culled after obtaining the result of a combination of traits related to litter production and disease reduction.

The Crusader project team claimed that they obtained roughly a 10% increase in average daily growth rate and a 5% increase in number of kittens (young rabbits) weaned. By 2001, an estimate of 250 CSIRO rabbit breeding stock were sold to rabbit farmers.

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1.3 The rearing of rabbits for meat

In Australia, commercial rabbit meat farming is an intensive battery indoor operation. Rabbits are confined to wire cages suspended above the floor. The results from the Crusader programme was to adopt the New Zealand White as the primary breed used for meat. They demonstrated the best production qualities including maternal performance, superior litter sizes and rapid weight gain.

The Crusader rabbit strain was used by 25% of this new sector of farming.

A doe in the rabbit meat industry produces an average of eight litters a year consisting of around 40 weaners (young rabbits that have been taken from their mothers). The weaners are marketed for slaughter at the age of 11-13 weeks. According to the Department of Primary Industries, an average doe should be culled after she has weaned seven litters approximately every 56 weeks.

In breeding facilities and farms, does and bucks are kept in isolation, in separate cages. One buck serves approximately 10 does. The doe is brought to the buck’s cage by the farmer and then after mating, both are returned to isolation.

Commercial rabbit breeding has become more dependent on Artificial Insemination (AI) Programmes. Rabbit farms in Australia have been limited to the use of fresh diluted sperm collected from bucks on the farm. According to an ABC Landline interview with a large rabbit farm owner, one buck is typically used to inseminate 40 does through AI, compared to natural mating which uses one buck to one doe per day. Up to 790 rabbits are inseminated a day which at one kitten per doe, provides 780 extra kittens slaughtered every week.

When a doe has her litter, she is kept with the kittens for about four weeks until they have been weaned. The weaners are then transferred to another cage (they are now called grower or fatter rabbits) where they are kept for 11-13 weeks, until they are slaughtered (Fryers). Normally, the higher the mortality rate during fattening translates to the production phase being shortened, i.e. they are killed as little as 10 weeks old.

The Grower rabbits are intensively reared during their average short lives of 12 weeks. They are provided with 0.07m² of space per rabbit, as recommended by the Model Code of Practice for the intensive husbandry of rabbits, which is roughly the area of an A4 sheet of paper. To keep the operation of rearing meat rabbits profitable, rabbits are fed with least-cost diet pellets.

1.4 The industry by numbers

In 1998, nearly 1 million tonnes of rabbit meat were produced for human consumption worldwide. 56% of this was from intensive rabbit farms. The main producers of farmed rabbit meat are China, Venezuela and countries in the European Union.

Between 1998 and 2000, 106 tonnes of Australian farmed rabbit meat were produced. This translated to 0.02% of world production.

In 2002, after the introduction of the CSIRO/RIRDC joint project “Crusader”, 561 rabbit producers were estimated to be operating in Australia; 500 in New South Wales; 52 in Victoria; 6 in South Australia and 3 in Western Australia. Also in 2002, 25 farmed rabbit slaughterhouses were in operation; 9 in New South Wales, 6 in South Australia, 6 in Victoria, and 1 in Western Australia.

Over the period of 1998-2003, rabbit meat production in Australia grew an average of 10% per year.

In 2003, rabbit meat production in Australia was estimated at 157 tonnes and in 2004, roughly 298 tonnes. At that time, the economic estimated projection was that it would reach approximately 305 tonnes by 2008 and 594 tonnes by 2015, a growth of 13% in the period 2004-2008 followed by 8% growth up to 2015.

However, by 2006/07, the number of intensive rabbit farms shrank to 44. The shutdown was mainly due to disease problems and the costly operations.

In 2011/12, rabbit meat production was down by 19% from 2006/07. At that time only 22 official rabbit meat producers were left in Australia. These however were the larger farms with an estimated average number of 300 breeding does producing a total of 265 tonnes of rabbit meat a year.

In 2014, there were less than 10 operating rabbit farms in Australia. The five-year RD&E report of new, developing and maturing animal industries by the RIRDC for the year 2013-2018 has put a hold on further development funding until a significant shift in status. The report indicates that although the demand is good, the industry turnover is down to $3.1 million, with negative growth prospects due to disease and welfare issues.

According to RIRDC reports, the key challenges for effective rabbit farming are: provision of suitable housing, feed prices, disease control (including calici virus and myxomatosis), welfare, slaughter and processing, ensuring a clean industry profile and promotion and marketing of rabbit meat. Correspondence between an RIRDC representative and van der Sluys of konijnen farm in Baldivis (the oldest farm in Western Australia), indicates that the main costs in rabbit farming are the purpose-built sheds to overcome heat stress in rabbits and ventilation systems that can deal with the vast amount of ammonia from rabbit excretion. In addition to that, there are the costs associated with the high mortality rate of weaners (30-40%) and 20% of growers (from diarrhoea resulting from low cost feeding formula). Note that feed costs are estimated at 72% of the total cost of production according to the CSIRO.

The vaccination against the calicivirus is also an added cost. The calicivirus, now spread throughout Australia, was introduced to eradicate wild rabbits. It infects the lungs, gut and liver of the rabbit, causing death within 48 hours. The cost of vaccinating against this virus is around $2 a rabbit according to the CSIRO. However, some farmers claim that the cost of the annual vaccination is between $6 and $9 per rabbit.

The rabbit industry in Australia — both farmed and wild — is largely geared to production of meat for human consumption. The Australian farmed rabbit industry is unable to compete in export markets due to its production costs making it uncompetitive by world standards. Most of the demand for Australia’s farmed rabbit meat comes from the continental European Australian community, which has a tradition of consuming rabbit meat. Rabbit meat is mainly sold through European-style butchers and restaurants, as well as in produce markets and supermarkets. Although farmed rabbit remains a niche market, the demand is thought to far outstrip supply, according to a consultant to the RIRDC. Recent television shows such as Master Chef as well as celebrity chefs are pushing the farmed rabbit meat back into the public eye.
Intensive rabbit farms cause rabbits physiological, behavioural and health issues. This is related to the very special needs of this complex, timid and emotional species and their sensitivity to environmental conditions.

The domesticated rabbit’s behaviour is known to be very similar to that of their counterpart the wild rabbit. Wild rabbits are territorial, herbivorous, coprophagous and crepuscular. They are animals that live in complex hierarchical social groups. Males are very territorial, and females protect their nests aggressively.

Rabbits are highly curious and investigative. Some of their behaviours are characterised by sniffing, digging and chewing objects found in the environment.

The restrictions of the farm captivity system completely prevent their natural expression of all these basic instincts and other behaviours. This leads to stress, frustration and physical health problems. Under farming captivity situations, it is common for rabbits to develop physiological and behavioural abnormalities, a clear indication that their welfare is impaired.

In intensive meat production systems rabbits are conventionally kept in metal wire-mesh cages without bedding, with the only equipment being a feeder and nipple drinkers. In addition to that, the floor area is very constrained, disallowing any of the natural behaviour movement. This inability to express natural behaviour, like the wild rabbit, contributes to lameness and inactivity. It also contributes to stress expressed as restlessness and changes in normal behaviour such as gnawing on steel bars.

Rabbits are highly motivated in foraging and nutritional enrichment. In nature, they spend a large amount of time and effort searching for food. In intensive meat production systems, feed is always distributed in the same location and animals are usually fed with a single complete feed mixture offering no variety nor the possibility to choose. Incomplete unbalanced feed, especially one lacking in the correct calcium to phosphorus ratio, can also contribute to overgrown teeth (Malocclusion) resulting in difficulty in eating and drinking causing anorexia and starvation.

In the following sections, a summary of the domestic rabbit behaviour is presented, as well as the restrictions imposed and consequences of intensive farming.
2.1 Domesticated rabbit behaviour

InStories rabbit tell, Susan Davis and Margo DeMello write:

“That rabbits can feel safe in houses – and bond deeply with their human companions – is a relatively modern concept. (That animals can have emotions and express them is an even more modern concept, one that makes some philosophers and scientists apoplectic, but that people who live and work with animals consider a no-brainer)”2.

Meat rabbits in battery farms are all European domesticated rabbits. They are the same as those bred as pets. The New Zealand Whites have been widely adopted as meat grower rabbits, following the Crusader program, for their production qualities3. Their docile and calm temperament was also a factor as it made them easier to handle.

Domesticated rabbits kept as pets live on average between 8-14 years. They are very aware of their surroundings, curious, affectionate animals who exhibit a range of behaviours and emotions while living indoors. They initiate play with other rabbits as well as humans or other household pets. They can be litter trained like cats, and can speak much of their time investigating the house, the furniture and chewing on exposed cables and chairs. They jump on tables or laps and beg for treats. They communicate with humans through soft noises, such as “grunting” or “teeth purring” to denote aggression or pleasure respectively. Hind leg thumps are usually a sign of apprehension or fright.

Rabbits have a variety of facial expressions or grimaces that denote their mood. A chart called “The Rabbit Grimace Scale”4 has been developed by researchers to aid vets to identify the level of pain in a rabbit through their facial expressions.

House rabbits will also communicate with humans by pushing their noses on their ankles, licking the humans as appreciation or tugging at trousers to indicate their presence or to demand food. They often flip their heads and ears from side to side in a very quick movement as a sign of happiness especially at the sight of the human caretaker bringing in greens in the morning. They lie on their pet beds, run through cat flaps to get out in the yard, and perform “binkies” which are random leaps in the air denoting happiness. They also play with toys which they flick in the air or push around with their noses.

They are also very curious when their letters are being changed. They will make sure they are present, watching carefully what is happening to this place they like spending so much time foraging in. If upset or fed up with the human affection, they can be motionless and docile. Rabbits also leave their scent from their chin gland on places they adopt as their own by “chinning” objects, and sometime if the human is lucky enough, the rabbits may “chin” the human’s feet.

Rabbits naturally rest for 12-18hrs a day22. When at rest they sit in a crouched position and when feeling relaxed they sit with their hind legs stretched out behind the body, or lie on their side with all legs extended24.

Thumping on the ground with their hind legs when danger is detected serves as a warning signal to the other rabbits in the group. The rabbit is a prey animal and therefore their main form of defence is to first stand motionless and, then flee. Aggressive thumping serves as a warning to predators and other rabbits. Rabbits also leave scent from the chin gland on places they adopt as their own.

During grazing, rabbits move slowly but can reach speeds of up to 30 km per hour when escaping or playing. They can jump higher than one meter and may suddenly change direction by zigzagging. Rabbits typically advance about 70 cm per hop22. These behaviours have evolved to assist with escape from their natural predators.

2.2 Wild rabbit behaviour

The European domestic rabbit exhibits similar behaviours to wild rabbits22-35. These include similar maternal and nesting instincts and the highly developed social hierarchy22. The main differences observed between wild and domestic rabbits relate to the daily circadian rhythms, determined by the light and dark hours as well as the habitat they live in22.

In the wild, rabbits are social animals. They live in large groups (colonies), in warrens or burrows which they dig in natural terrain22-35. Rabbits use their burrows for hiding. These warrens provide them with safety from predators such as birds of prey and foxes21. They will only leave their warrens at dusk to forage22. Outside their warrens, rabbits must be aware of their surroundings at all time. This is done by frequently scanning the environment by standing on their hind limbs22.

Rabbits adapt well to the household routine. Some will even respond to their names, knowing when it is feeding time. They often find house rabbits ambushing humans in the kitchen when a fridge door or treat bag is opened. They jump on furniture and watch television with the rest of the household and go to sleep at similar times to humans. They are very adaptable to the human routine.

Domesticated rabbits are also very social if they are familiar with each other and if their environment allows the individual to initiate contact, as well as to avoid it21. When they are the only rabbit in a household, they tend to make friends or “bond” with humans or other animals such as cats. Otherwise when bonded in pairs or larger groups, they groom each other, explore surroundings together, seek refuge in each other’s company and chase one another for fun. Some even follow their humans from room to room. In bonded pairs, when one dies, some rabbits will grieve the loss even to the extent that they will stop eating and eventually die.

Many meat rabbits have been rescued, rehabilitated and adopted as indoor house rabbits. The docile and affectionate nature of these New Zealand White rabbits make them an ideal house companion given the right care and environment. They can be stimulated with toys for entertainment to avoid a safe comfortable environment the anxiety instilled in them from the ill treatment and confinement at farms subsides and their natural docility returns.

The House Rabbit Society22 in the United States has become an international icon of knowledge for rabbit carers since 1985. They have educated thousands of people in keeping rabbits as indoor pets. They actively promote the concept of the house rabbit with a status of a household pet equal to the dog or cat.

With this also came an advancement in specialised veterinary rabbit care (exotic veterinary care) and knowledge by pioneers such as Frances Harcourt-Brown24 and Teresa Bradley Bay22. Until relatively recently much of this expertise was for use primarily to rabbits bred for meat, fur or research. Just like cat and dog owners, rabbit carers have started to demand the highest standards of care for their pets from veterinarians. Vets can now specialise in exotic veterinary science for companion rabbits. The improved knowledge in spaying and neutering helps the rabbits adapt to being house pets.

2.3 The battery cages

There are many studies of caged rabbit behaviour in the laboratory environments22,26,27,36. Rabbits in the meat industry are kept in smaller cages than their lab counterparts22,37. The confinement and general quality of these cages often contribute to poor health and well-being as well as psychological stress38.

The cages provide neither social nor environmental enrichment of any kind, nor do they allow for normal behaviour such as standing on hind legs, hopping, digging and hiding22. This confinement and limited environment results in unnatural behaviours such as bar licking and chewing; pawing at the corners of cages; wire biting, over eating or anorexia22,26,27. There is little...
It is reported by investigators that caged rabbits often look unhealthy and depressed, sitting in a hunched position for hours on end. Cages are one of the most important welfare parameters for rabbits in confinement. In the wild, a vigilant rabbit sits on their hind legs in the lookout position with ears pricked1. In addition, they seek out natural elevated areas. This same behaviour is seen in domesticated rabbits such as climbing onto boxes to explore their surroundings. In the standard cages provided there is not enough height to allow the rabbit to sit upright without the ears touching the top of the cage. This confinement denies the animal an opportunity to exhibit yet another basic natural behaviour2-6. To further elaborate the cruelty of the cage system, New Zealand rabbits 12 weeks and over are on average about 15-20 cm tall when sitting in the typical look-out/alert posture with ears pricked up13 and approximately 30 cm long when resting in a typical lateral position7. With a typical cage height of 45cm indicated for that rabbit age group (as suggested by the nonbinding welfare guide issued by the Department of Primary Industries) they are unable to sit up or lie down naturally8. An area of 0.07m² is recommended for the grower rabbits which translates to an area approximately the size of an A4 sheet of paper. However, the height of the cage specified for a grower rabbit’s life span is not indicated by the welfare model of practice for intensive rabbit husbandry9. Journals from overseas which look at the welfare of animals kept in confinement conclude that considering the typical posture of an animal in relation to cage size is a minimum humane standard10-12. Research into the well-being of rabbits recommend woodchip litter or shredded paper and straw as bedding13,14. This provides a comfortable floor suited to the rabbits. Rabbits in meat farms are restricted to a floor which is a metal grid or wire. This is uncomfortable for the animals and often results in sores15.

Rabbits are clean in nature. They will typically divide their living space into separate areas, such as to lay down, to toilet and to clean themselves. This allows the animals to control their environment16. Manure production from rabbits is about 153 kg of faeces plus urine per day for a 100 doe rabbit farm17. This is equivalent to about 1.95 kg of nitrogen and 0.9 kg of phosphorus provided there is not enough height to allow the rabbit to sit upright without the ears touching the top of the cage. This investigators55, 56. - The noxious effect of ammonia and gas from urine and faeces built up underneath them as noted by undercover investigations55, 56. - Inappropriate handling methods by farmers, catchers and transport staff. - Presence of stressors such as noises and other animals. - Inappropriate quality and quantity of feed and dirty water. - Heat stress. - Sensitivity to ambient temperatures - Intensive density of animals in one group. - Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. - Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. - Intensive density of animals in one group. - Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. - Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. - Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. - Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. - Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18. Polydipsia (excessive thirst) and polyuria (excessive urination) are common amongst caged rabbits37. These indicate dehydration18.
Mange is very often found on rabbit farms. This is caused by contagious, parasitic mites, which burrow into the skin and ears of the rabbits and lay their eggs. All these conditions result in significant animal suffering.

Neurological disorders

Poor diet, stress, disease and a compromised immune system which occurs in intensive farms predispose rabbits to the development of *E. cuniculi* infections resulting in a crippling condition known as head tilt. Head tilt is highly infectious in rabbit farms due to the production of spores which are released in the urine. Rabbits on the bottom of tiered cage systems are at particularly high risk of infection. Head tilt symptoms include short and rapid movements of the eyeball; uncoordinated gait; disorientation and rolling, and a lack of appetite resulting from nausea caused by dizziness. Undercover farm investigations observed a significant number of head tilt cases.

Abscesses

Abscesses are one of the most common conditions observed in factory farms. They are pockets of body tissue filled with pus. These can be as large as tennis balls. They can also occur internally with no external sign causing septicaemia (blood poisoning). Abscesses are caused by bacteria which spread in the air or by contact with contaminated cages or other rabbits. Untreated wounds such as broken skin or injuries from fighting are common sites for infection.

Mastitis

Does on meat farms produce at least eight litters a year. They are re-mated before each litter is weaned. Mastitis is frequently observed both by investigations and studies in meat farms. It is an infection of the mammary glands which causes swelling and redness around the nipple which becomes enlarged, inflamed and painful.

Respiratory infections

Evidence from undercover investigations show that respiratory infections are the most common illnesses found in rabbit farms. The main cause of these infections is polluted air within farm sheds often the result of built up piles of faeces which encourages bacterial spores to become airborne. In addition, the pools of ammonia rich urine beneath cages further aggravates the lungs of rabbits causing respiratory difficulties. Common respiratory diseases are snuffles which show up as repeated sneezing with a clear or thick mucus discharge and pneumonia which is seen as laboured breathing with the head tilted backwards. Rabbits are compulsory nasal breathers so respiratory conditions will lead to major discomfort and ultimately suffocation.
3. Industry standards on rabbit husbandry and slaughter practices

The term animal "welfare" has been defined by the advocates of the animal use industries to justify inflicted cruelty on animals in relation to mounting community concerns about animal suffering, particularly in factory farms.

According to Broom, the term "welfare" refers to "the state of an individual in relation to its environment" which can be measured. Poor welfare will lead to failure or difficulty in coping with the provided environment as well as general animal suffering. According to Broom’s research, strong indicators of poor welfare include reduced life expectancy, impaired growth, impaired reproduction, body damage, disease, immunosuppression, adrenal activity, behavioural anomalies, and self-mutilation. All those indicators have been found to be widespread in rabbit meat farms in Australia.

Morisse has shown that for assessment of rabbit welfare, behaviour and physiological aspects are important factors that must be considered. To provide basic welfare it is therefore essential to provide rabbits freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition, general discomfort, to provide them with adequate shelter, and freedom from pain, injury and distress. Without the rapid diagnosis and treatment of injury and disease, freedom to display normal patterns of behaviour free from fear and distress will be seriously impaired.

This evaluation draws directly from the five freedoms welfare concept from the early 1990s. More than two decades later, and with an increase in scientific understanding, it is now widely understood that the basic five freedoms do not properly capture the basic necessities of farmed rabbits. We now know that animals may also experience other very undesirable negative states that include anxiety, fear, panic, frustration, anger, helplessness, loneliness, boredom and depression brought on by threatening, cramped, barren and isolated conditions.
3.1 Rabbits, welfare and the law

There are many Acts and Regulations relating to the treatment of animals. These differ between the various states and territories. However, all the Acts and Regulations have the following three issues in common:

- They consider all animals as the personal ‘property’ of their human owners as opposed to considering their interests as sentient beings. The ‘property’ classification is a fundamental issue for the law’s treatment of animals, as this provides human owners with complete dominion. This effectively means that a given animal’s protection under the law is dependent on the owner’s intended use for them rather than the animal’s innate interests.
- The various policy makers of animal welfare standards are supposed to represent the economic interests of industry as well as the interests of animals. Unless these policy makers are truly independent, there will be inherent conflicts of interest. With this, the economic interests of the industries will always assume priority over meeting the real needs and interests of the animals.
- Whether welfare codes or standards are adopted by an Act or Regulation, or are part of a license condition, they will not be part of the law and therefore not enforceable.

How does this impact meat rabbits in Australia?

Rabbits in Australia are used in almost every known way. They are raised for food, hunted for sport, bred for fur and pelts. They are also used in education and research, in films and petting zoos and they are sold in pet shops as companion animals. Each of these categories of use will fall under different regulatory statutes.

As animal law in Australia varies between states and territories, the state of NSW has been chosen for this report to illustrate the role of the law in protecting the interests of farmed rabbits.

Agricultural rabbits raised for meat in NSW are protected by a single act: the NSW Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 (POCTAA). NSW has the oldest legislation pertaining to cruelty to animals of all the states and territories—nearly 40 years old. In 2003, a National Animal Welfare Bill was introduced to the senate. Amongst different proposed reforms, the proposed bill highlighted the need to replace the POCTAA based on major advances in knowledge and understanding of animal biology, psychology and behaviour. This bill had several readings in the senate but finally failed to go through in 2008.

POCTAA’s objectives are defined as follows:

(i) to prevent cruelty to animals, and
(ii) to promote the welfare of animals by requiring a person in charge of an animal to:

(a) provide care for the animal, and
(b) treat the animal in a humane manner, and
(c) ensure the welfare of the animal.

*POCTAA’s definition of cruelty gives examples of cruel activities, premised with the statement they must also be "unreasonable, unnecessary or unjustifiable". This leaves open that in certain cases these prescribed acts of cruelty could be considered necessary or reasonable or otherwise justifiable. In the definition of cruelty, the examples given in section 4(2) of POCTAA include "beating, kicking, mutilating, abusing, maiming, tormenting or injuring, as well as overworking and exposure to excessive temperatures".

Also, it is important to note that there are various exemptions to POCTAA’s specified welfare requirements for so called “stock animals” (farm animals – see definition below).

Stock animals means an animal which belongs to the class of animals comprising cattle, horses, sheep, goats, deer, pigs, poultry and any other species of animal prescribed for the purposes of this definition.

Exemptions make it more economical to operate without the extra burden of meeting fundamental welfare laws. For example, section 9 (1A) requires that confined animals are provided adequate exercise, whereas subsection (1) excludes stock animals (other than a horse) and animals of a species which are usually kept in captivity by means of a cage. While rabbits are not specifically mentioned in the definition of stock animals, it appears they would be considered as such. Therefore, it is apparent that farmers keeping rabbits on a meat farm are exempted from this specific welfare law.

Codes of practice

There are 21 Australian Model Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Animals. These are prepared by the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC) within the Primary Industries Ministerial Council (PIMC) system. Membership of the AWC comprises representatives from each of the state departments with responsibility for agriculture; the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; the CSIRO; and Animal Health Australia (industry bodies including producers, transporters and abattoirs).

The codes cover the husbandry of livestock species under such topics as:

- Basic welfare needs (including water, air, food)
- Intensive stocking systems
- Handling
- Management practices
- Health
- Humane destruction

The codes of practice only become relevant when they are referenced in the law, i.e. in an Act or Regulation; or if their compliance is made a condition of a relevant licence. Therefore, where a code of practice has not been incorporated in a legislation or part of an operating license, general industry practices are likely to be accepted under the law.

There is one code of practice relating to the welfare of rabbits in intensive farms, “Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals: Intensive Husbandry of Rabbits”. This is not part of any legislation in NSW as it is not specifically referenced in the law, nor is it a specified condition of any licence. It is therefore not an offence if animals are not kept as specified in this basic welfare document. The Department of Primary Industries recommends prospective farmers use the code as a guide to minimum welfare standards in intensive farming.

In NSW, the relevant laws governing slaughter of rabbits come from the Food Regulation 2015 (NSW). Part 9. division 2, Clause 85 requires compliance with the following two standards for abattoirs:

- 4.46-1998: Hygienic production of rabbit meat for human consumption
- 4.46-2007: Hygienic production and transportation of meat and meat products for human consumption

Both these standards are vague on the welfare requirements with no methods of ‘stunning’ defined. Killing by “sticking” (severing of the large blood vessels to induce effective bleeding) is noted. The standards specify that rabbits should only be sourced from farms with “good” husbandry practices but there is no clear definition of that provided. Also, it is important to note that other than the cruelty laws discussed above husbandry practices are not part of any legislation in NSW.

The law is vague on many matters and definitions such as “humane” or “welfare”. If an incident of cruelty is brought to court by enforcement officers, then it becomes the task of the Judicial officer to decide based on evidence put to them whether the cruelty was ‘necessary’, ‘justifiable’ or ‘reasonable’.

Animal welfare legislation is the only legislation in Australia which has a criminal component, yet is not driven by the state or territory police forces. Instead, the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) enforces the cruelty Act (POCTAA). The RSPCA NSW is named in the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 as a charitable organisation, which may be approved for law enforcement purposes by its officers.

3.2 Investigations into current practices

Most farm animal welfare guidelines in the world take into consideration the five freedoms” of Brambell" published in 1965. Those five freedoms describe what the basic welfare should be for animals under human control, i.e. freedom from hunger and thirst, from discomfort by providing an appropriate environment (including shelter and a comfortable resting area), freedom from pain, injuries and disease, freedom from ‘fear’ and distress, and freedom to express ‘normal’ behaviour. Brambell’s report acknowledges the psychological aspect in welfare with the following definition: “welfare is a wide term that embraces both the physical and mental well-being of the animal. Any attempt to evaluate welfare, therefore, must consider the scientific evidence available concerning the feelings of animals that can be derived from their structure and functions and also from their behaviour.

There have been many scientific studies completed to evaluate objectively welfare levels of rabbits in captivity. There have been many studies considering the stress caused by battery farms, handling of rabbits and transport such as with biochemical changes like the rise in body temperature. There have not been any improvements on the principle of five freedoms in the past five decades; i.e. there have been no efforts or ambitions to have “good welfare” rather than “basic welfare” in meat farms. More, as discussed in the previous section, the welfare code is not part of legislation and the result of that is shown in investigations into the rabbit battery meat farms in Australia where farms do not even uphold the basic welfare guidelines from 1965. Cruelty and mistreatment of rabbits causes fear, injury, pain and psychological distress. Animals are pushed hard with the methods of production causing malnutrition, distress, diseases and the deprivation of natural environments results in abnormal behaviours and obvious physical suffering. This is by any definition cruel animal abuse.
According to the Food Agricultural Organisation\(^1\), in a typical rabbitry, the mortality rate between birth and weaning is usually very high estimating between 15-20%. It is evident from studies that achieving a mortality figure of less than 10% in rabbit farms is nearly impossible\(^2\). In a paper published by the RIRDC\(^3\), the reported mortality rates on Australian farms were about 21% from birth to weaning and 10% from weaning to slaughter\(^4\). In a 2005 RIRDC publication\(^5\), industry mortality figures were 30% kitten deaths and 15% grower deaths. According to an article by the ABC Landline\(^6\), pathogens and nutritional problems have been found to cause 30%-50% deaths on Australian farms.

The main problems in current practices of intensive husbandry systems for rabbits as reported in research and backed up by investigations are the following:

1. The lack of space to run and perform natural locomotive movements such as the recommended minimum of three consecutive hops and jumps\(^7,8\). A space slightly larger than an A4 page is provided per grower rabbit as recommended by the welfare guide.

   "Severe overcrowding was an obvious issue- the rabbits could hardly move. The cages themselves were barren; no bedding was given to the rabbits being grown for their meat."\(^9\)

   Investigator’s account of space and unnatural environment in one of the largest meat farms in Australia\(^9\).
2. Aggressive behaviour due to forced mating and over-crowding. This can result in biting, abscesses, lacerations, damage to eyes and ears and general mutilations.

Evidence of aggression between rabbits in overcrowded cages in one of Australia’s largest rabbit meat farms. Photos courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

3. Lack of provision of an area in which a medium sized rabbit can sit up normally with ears erect. This is thought to be an innate mechanism exhibited by rabbits in the wild both inside and outside the burrow in terms of their survival. New Zealand rabbits 12 weeks and over are on average about 55-70 cm tall when sitting in the typical lookout/alert posture with ears pricked up and approximately 80 cm long when resting in typical lateral position. A cage height of 45cm would cause head trauma in case of a rabbit being startled.

Evidence of rabbits being unable to fully stand up with ears stretched. Photos from Tasmania’s largest rabbit meat farm. Photos courtesy Animal Liberation NSW.

4. Lack of separate areas to hide or rest or use as toilet.

Single cage systems where rabbits are unable to move. Urine and faeces run straight through under the cage. Photos from Tasmania’s and Western Australia’s largest rabbit meat farms. Photos courtesy of Animal Liberation NSW.
Single cage suspended systems where urine and faeces run straight through under the cage. Photos from Victoria’s largest rabbit meat farm. Photo courtesy of Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

5. Lack of any stimulation in the environment causing abnormal behaviours, such as wire-gnawing and pawing at corners.

Cage and wire biting and pawing are signs of stress and boredom in rabbits. Photos from Western Australia’s largest and longest standing rabbit meat farm. Photos courtesy of Animal Liberation NSW.

6. Dirty drinkers and lack of or inaccessibility to food or drink.

Evidence of empty feeders and overcrowded cages preventing rabbits from the basic right of food in one of Australia’s largest rabbit meat farms. Photo courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

7. Lack of visual covers from above and behind for the animal to be protected from elements and predators causing stress. Rabbits startle when they suddenly see people or other animals.

Lack of any hiding areas and covers inducing stress in rabbits who are animals of prey and have an innate need to hide. This photo and the one to the left courtesy Animal Liberation NSW.

Fear shown in rabbits as they huddle up to protect themselves. The lack of any hiding areas and covers inducing stress in rabbits who are animals of prey and have an innate need to hide. This photo and the one to the right courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.
8. Lack of objects to gnaw (straw, grass, sticks) causing overgrown teeth, a condition which results in anorexia due to the inability to feed.

Evidence of malocclusion in rabbit meat farms due to the lack of objects to gnaw and hay or proper feed. This causes anorexia and starvation. Photo courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

9. Inappropriate floor types causing splay legs, sore hocks and injuries to paws

Evidence of sore hocks from wire cage and inflamed joints due to trapped legs between the wires are common in Australian rabbit farms. A rescued meat rabbit from a Victorian Farm shows a common disability known as splay legs. Photos courtesy of Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

10. Large variation in ambient temperatures causing physical stress.

11. Lack of social contacts, for the isolated buck and does. Keeping rabbits singly in cages is considered a breach of animal welfare, as they are unexposed to natural stimulus and have no social contact or suitable conditions to move. Social deprivation in rabbits also interferes with the development of normal adult behaviours.

Evidence of sore hocks from wire cage and inflamed joints due to trapped legs between the wires are common in Australian rabbit farms. A rescued meat rabbit from a Victorian Farm shows a common disability known as splay legs. Photos courtesy of Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

The lack of ability to move properly on wire cage housing in Tasmania's and Western Australia's largest farms. Photos courtesy of Animal Liberation NSW.

“Some rabbits really struggled with the wire flooring. Filming from underneath I could see how much the mesh pushed into the bottom of their feet. Some of the kittens actually became stuck in the wire mesh and their little feet slipped through the holes.”

Investigator’s account of cage wire flooring in one of the largest meat farms in Australia.

Social isolation in rabbit meat farms of breeding bucks and does during their whole lives causes psychological behaviour such as fear and stress. Photos taken in Western Australia’s largest farms. Photos courtesy of Animal Liberation NSW.
12. Disturbed maternal behaviour and care such as nursing\(^5\) with the lack of possibilities of natural behaviour and proper care of kittens by does being removed too early and not having proper hiding areas and nests.

13. Various noise stressors in rabbitries cause antagonistic effects to the rabbit's nervous system. This is shown as nervous and behavioural abnormalities and can lead to startled responses resulting in traumatic injuries to limbs and back\(^6\). This is exacerbated by the short cages where the rabbit cannot stand vigilantly or run for cover.

14. The large mobile ears of a rabbit allow them to amplify and detect sound. This is another mechanism to allow them to detect where a possible danger is coming from\(^2\). They can hear low sounds very well and hear high frequencies up to 50 kHz\(^2\) compared with the human audible range of up to 20 kHz\(^5\). Loud noises are known to cause damage and alterations to the rabbit's inner ear\(^5\). Studies\(^5\) have found that high pitched or loud noise can also affect gastrointestinal, immunological, reproductive, nervous and cardiovascular systems, as well as metabolic and behavioural abnormalities such as being on constant high alert. Rabbits are easily startled by sudden noise, and may injure themselves in panic\(^5\), particularly in the low hanging cage systems in meat farms.

“Loud music played inside the sheds—I think it was used to mask outside noises frightening the rabbits who would try and jump in their small cages in an attempt to flee. However, the music seemed to cause more stress—I imagine they struggled to sleep with the constant noise and light.”

An investigator’s account into one of the major rabbit farms in Australia\(^6\).

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“Loud music played inside the sheds—I think it was used to mask outside noises frightening the rabbits who would try and jump in their small cages in an attempt to flee. However, the music seemed to cause more stress—I imagine they struggled to sleep with the constant noise and light.”

An investigator’s account into one of the major rabbit farms in Australia\(^6\).
15. Lack of inspection and treatment of injuries and diseases and the removal of the deceased. Breach in basic Animal welfare, the right to an animal to live without injury and pain.

Deceased rabbits are commonly found in farms. Many are left to rot within the cages with healthier rabbits. Photo from one of Australia’s largest rabbit meat farms. Photo courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

Some deceased rabbits left to rot on the floor of the sheds in the urine or faeces. Photo from one of Australia’s largest rabbit meat farms. Photo courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

Evidence of death from coccidia diarrhoea. A highly contagious disease. Photo from one of Australia’s largest rabbit meat farms. Photo courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

I saw several rabbits with overgrown toe nails that had not been trimmed. These rabbits appeared to struggle on the wire mesh caging as their nails wrapped around the wire flooring making movement difficult.

An investigator’s account into one of the major rabbit farms in Australia.

Evidence of untreated injury, untrimmed nails making it more difficult to move in Western Australia’s largest and longest operating rabbit meat farm. Photo courtesy Animal Liberation NSW.

Head Tilt brought about by stress experienced in meat farms. A neurological condition which, at an advanced stage as seen in the photographic evidence, renders the rabbit unable to stand or eat. Photos courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

Common eye injuries and infections. Photo courtesy Animal Liberation NSW.

Evidences of untrimmed nails. Photo courtesy Animal Liberation NSW.

Coccidia diarrhoea. Photo courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

Evidence of untrimmed nails and coccidia diarrhoea. Photo courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.
Head Tilt brought about by stress experienced on meat farms. A neurological condition which, at an advanced stage as seen in the photographic evidence, renders the rabbit unable to stand or eat. Photo courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

Skin conditions such as Mange and Abscesses as big as tennis balls left untreated. Pus from ruptured infected abscesses. Photos from one of Australia’s largest rabbit meat farms. Photos courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

Respiratory conditions are very common on meat farms. Evidence of thick mucus discharge from a weaner as seen in this photo from one of Australia’s largest rabbit meat farms. Photo courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

Mastitis from over breeding and the lack of hygienic conditions. Photo courtesy of Freedom for Farmed Rabbits.

Masses of faecal matter pile up under the cages with ammonia infecting rabbits’ lungs. Photos from the largest and longest operating rabbit meat farm in Western Australia. Photo courtesy Animal Liberation NSW.

16. Lack of Hygiene

“I recall being taken back by the smell of the place- it was like a burning ammonia smell that made my eyes water. These places are smelly, dirty, and dusty- I wanted to leave immediately. I can’t imagine how horrible it must be for these animals to live there every day.”

An investigator’s account into one of the major rabbit farms in Australia.

Lack of Hygiene
“Under the cages masses of fur and faecal matter were in huge piles. They were covered in insects who were also feasting on rabbits who had died inside cages.”

An investigator’s account into one of the major rabbit farms in Australia.

Evidence of pests which carry diseases; insects feasting on dead rabbits and rats dead on the cages. Photos from the largest and longest operating rabbit meat farm in Western Australia. Photos courtesy Animal Liberation NSW.
3.3 Slaughter

The rabbit industry slaughters weaners between the ages of 11-13 weeks old before their coats have fully developed. They are slaughtered either on- or transported to an all-purpose abattoir (includes poultry).

Transport and handling

There are many studies into the stress induced on rabbits by their transport, handling and slaughter. Heart rate, body temperature and plasma samples are examined which are indicators of physiological and biochemical changes induced by stress. Stress causes catecholamine release, muscular contractions and a rise in body temperature. Transport and slaughter are shown to induce a very significant increase of those parameters indicating severe stress for the animal. Other measured physiological parameters indicate rabbits experience great muscular exertion during transport.

Rabbits are transported from farm to abattoirs in crates or cages. They are loaded into these by hand. During transport, the majority of trauma observed are haemorrhages, bruises, broken legs, and torn muscles including the internal part of the loin region.

While a transport guide is provided in the model code of practice, it is vague and not part of legislation. In Europe, it is known that rabbits marked for slaughter are generally transported in crates made of plastic wire and the number of rabbits loaded into crates varies between 14-16 animals/crate.

Fasting

The Australian Standard for Hygienic Production of Rabbit Meat for Human Consumption states that feed should be withheld from rabbits for 24 hours before slaughter. It is well known that for rabbits, 24 hours without food can result in Gastro-Intestinal (GI) stasis and some liver damage. A rabbit can begin to suffer liver damage within a few hours once the GI tract is empty. Veterinarians therefore never advise fasting a rabbit. GI stasis causes extreme abdominal pain in rabbits. The slowdown of the normal intestinal movement will result in a painful death in a short period of time. In this state, harmful bacteria are known to proliferate and take over the beneficial bacteria in the cecum. This in turn causes gas to be generated in the gut which causes extreme pain to the rabbit. Some of these bacteria produce deadly toxins, which the rabbit will not be able to dispose of which will subsequently lead to liver failure.

Slaughter

The method of slaughter of rabbits in abattoirs is mentioned in the Australian Standard for Hygienic Production of Rabbit Meat for Human Consumption and the Australian Standard for Hygienic production and transportation of meat and meat products for human consumption. While both standards are made legal by their adoption into the legislation of Food Regulation (NSW), they have little to no reference to animal welfare other than a reference to using “approved humane methods”. The stated goal of the Standard for Hygienic Production of Rabbit Meat for Human Consumption AS 4466:1998 is to restrict the count of total viable bacteria on the surface of the meat from the time of dressing until the product is packaged for sale. The standard includes brief references to stunning (clause 11.4) but provides no details on the actual “approved humane stunning” or slaughter procedure. Clause 11.4 states: “Restraining and Stunning – Rabbits to be restrained by an approved method and electrically stunned or made unconscious and insensible to pain by other approved humane methods prior to bleeding.”
This standard (AS 4466:1998), according to a 2010 research report by the RIRDC\(^5\), has led to a variety of interpretation in procedures and processing methods between the food safety authorities of each state\(^5\). The report highlights that different states use different stunning methods for rabbits. These range from operating completely without stunning, to other cases where rabbits are over stunned by hitting causing blood clots and bruising\(^5\). The report also highlights the concerns raised by the Thai Authorities upon their negotiations for the purchase of Australian rabbit meat.

The difficulty in achieving export accreditation to Thailand was due to the shackling and lack of humane stunning methods used. The area of concern was the Australian approved practice of movement passage of the rabbits to the stunner before processing\(^5\).

The recommendations by the RIRDC which followed the Thai export accreditation were for faster rabbit meat processing times which provides lower costs and higher margins.

It also recommended the Farm Rabbit Industry of Australia survey rabbit processes to identify that stunning methods being used and based on this suggest improved methods\(^5\). As of 2017 there are still no new mandated practices for slaughterhouses and both slaughter standards remain unchanged.

The second meat slaughter standard (AS 4696-2007): Hygienic production and transportation of meat and meat products for human consumption, is a general standard for all animals and is also vague on the welfare procedures with no methods of ‘stunning’ defined either. As mentioned before, killing is by sticking (severing of the large blood vessels to induce effective bleeding).

There is, however, an Australian reference document which gives detailed instructions on killing rabbits. This was published by Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre (CRC)\(^7\) in 2012. This document outlines the following methods of rabbit slaughter and stunning:

1. **Stunning** is to be achieved by cervical dislocation for rabbits that are under 1kg. Cervical dislocation means separating the skull and the brain from the spinal cord by a pressure blow to the skull\(^7\). This causes the blood flow to the brain to be reduced eventually causing death. Research shows the animal has 13 seconds of consciousness after the dislocation\(^7\).

2. For rabbits, heavier than 1kg, dislocation is accomplished by holding the rabbit upside down with the legs in one hand while stretching the head backwards until the dislocation is felt. The rabbit is then suspended by both legs while a sharp blow is directed behind the ears. In the absence of a sharp object for the blow, the rabbit may be picked up by the hind legs and swung against a hard surface such as a rock or post\(^7\).

3. **Decapitation** using a guillotine or sharp blade. Undercover investigations have observed electrical and circular saws within rabbit farms.

4. **Exsanguination or ‘bleeding out’** by cutting the major blood vessels in the neck while suspended upside down.

Slaughtering rabbits by bleeding out. Top photos courtesy Jo-Anne McArthur / We Animals\(^6\).

Left and right: Inhouse slaughterhouse. Photographs depict transport crates and slaughter machinery on Victoria’s largest rabbit meat farm. Photos courtesy Freedom for Farmed Rabbits\(^5\).
4. Summary and concluding remarks

The main objective of this report was to highlight rabbit farming in Australia and bring the suffering of this species under current husbandry systems into mainstream knowledge. The report has been built on information obtained from research into rabbit behaviour and accounts from investigations into farming practices in Australia over the past two decades.
4.1 Summary

- Rabbit farming has been prominent in Australia for over three decades and there are indications that it may find a resurgence.
- Today, the vast majority of rabbit meat comes from intensive farms which we know neglect even the most fundamental needs of the rabbits.
- Rabbit meat farming has been promoted by the CSIRO research programme called Crusader sponsored by the RIRDC. The key outcome was to recommend domesticated European rabbits as the subjects. These are the same type regularly sold or adopted as pets.
- Rabbits are now rated as one of the top five companion animals in Australia. Their popularity is growing. Thousands of homes in Australia have rabbits as a valued and loved part of the family.
- Rabbits are intelligent, emotional and communicative animals. A large number of house rabbit owners as well as authors and researchers have documented this. Rabbits naturally form tight bonds with each other and bond to their adoptive families and can recognise and differentiate between humans. They recognise auditory vocabulary such as “treat”, “come”, “outdoor time”, etc.
- The field of exotic veterinary science has emerged simultaneously with the development of the House Rabbit Society and the growing numbers of people keeping companion rabbits.
- We now know from exotics science that rabbits are highly intelligent complex animals that have evolved basic natural behaviours related to their survival and welfare. When they are confined in cages and not allowed to express these basic behaviours they suffer great physical pain and psychological stress.
- The report shows that the conditions in which factory farmed rabbits are kept breach virtually all the requirements of basic welfare. This is not against the law since most states in Australia have not adopted any of the welfare codes of practice in their legislation.
- Some welfare facts:
  - Rabbits in meat farms are confined to bare wire cages so small they can’t stand up or stretch out.
  - Rather than foraging for grass and roots, they are fed industrially produced grain.
  - Their lives are short (10-13 weeks) and are ended by slaughter practices which contain no definition of stunning methods or welfare.
  - Bucks and does used for reproduction are kept in solitary confinement, a very unnatural situation. The does are culled on average after 7 litters.
  - Cages will often be stacked with the lower rabbits urine infested. The piles of faeces and urine under cages creates ammonia in such a high concentration that they suffer respiratory problems.
  - Cages are often covered with rabbit fur, with decomposing rabbits and flies over them on the floor or inside the cage.
  - Physical and psychological injuries are commonplace. Rabbit paws get stuck between the cage wires rendering them unable to move. Rabbits are seen gnawing on cage bars from desperation and emotional stress.
  - Rabbit meat sheds are always filthy with fixtures and fittings coated in dust, grime and fur.
  - Dead kittens or weak rabbits have been found by investigators left to rot on top of their cage or on the pile of faeces under the cage where they lie motionless coated in droppings that fall through the wire mesh of the cage. Not surprisingly endemic disease is prevalent on the farms, with eye infections, breathing difficulties, coccidia diarrhoea and head tilt induced by stress to name a few.
4.2 Concluding remarks and a call to action

There is virtually no awareness or even public acknowledgment of commercial rabbit farming in Australia. Investigations have been minimal, possibly as it is a smaller industry, or it is due to the great divide in Australia when it comes to rabbits, making it easier for the public to turn a blind eye. This divide is fuelled by the idea that rabbits are considered a “pest” constantly inflicting devastation on the land, which threatens farm economics and impacts habitat for native animal species. Regardless of the reason, the obvious welfare problems of rabbit farming remain out of the public eye.

Research into current farming practices demonstrates the complexity of the problem and the insufficient assessment by primary industries into rabbit welfare, namely the behavioural, physiological and psychological states of health. The fact that this species is delicate, emotional and sensitive to their surroundings is well understood, and has been documented by many authors and researchers. However, the intensification of production has been accomplished by disregard to any of their innate requirements.

Unfortunately, the serious animal welfare issues conflict with the economic goals of farming. So far there has been no humane legislative response. In NSW, for example, there is a code of practice for the welfare of rabbits in intensive farms but this has not been adopted into legislation. The other potential protection for rabbits is in the Animal Cruelty Acts and Regulations. This is, however, weak in that meat rabbits are exempt from many of the welfare rules in those Acts, as they are considered “stock animals”. One of the concerns for example, is the wording in the Acts which indicate that to be deemed cruel, the action must be considered “unreasonable” or “unnecessary”.

Therefore, the actual practices that are observed on the existing rabbit farms, as discussed and referenced in this report and the substantial film footage and photographic evidence taken by animal advocate groups are deemed legal even though they show rabbits in meat farms routinely treated without consideration to even the most basic welfare standards.

A call to action

We hope that with the publication of this report, the suffering of rabbits on meat farms will become mainstream knowledge.

As with many other animal industries, consumer action provides the biggest opportunity for improving the lives of animals deemed for commercial use. Lessons learnt from experience is that many restauranteurs, shop owners and catering businesses do not know about the animal cruelty behind rabbit farming and slaughter. Discussions with suppliers, caterers and restauranteurs therefore could build awareness of the plight rabbits suffer in those farms and bring an end to this cruel industry.

To help raise awareness or voice your concerns, join the campaign’s petition site www.downtherabbitholes.org/petitions.
References


Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 (NSW) 19 (1), (1A), (3).


Department of Primary Industries. 2004. Code of Practice for the Housing and Care of Laboratory Mice, Rats, Guinea Pigs and Rabbits. 25-26.


