

Abstract

The changing societal perception of animal welfare imposed to change the traditional animal housing and production concepts. Also rabbit production is not spared: an EFSA (2005) report highlighted the inadequacy of the conventional small wire cages with the natural behavioral needs of the rabbit. Moreover, organizations defending animal welfare impact both the public opinion and the retail with actions in the public media. Thus, for the future, it will be necessary also for rabbit production, to design alternative housing facilities in accordance with these new societal aspirations. The challenge is to design a housing that meet the expectations of the society but also those of the producers: to increase really the animal welfare, to present a production with an acceptable image, to preserve the technological and sanitary progress previously acquired and finally to guarantee the economic viability of rabbit production. This text describes first the conventional commercial rabbit housing with the so called double-purpose cages, used both for reproduction and for fattening in a “duo” management system. The technical and sanitary advantages are reviewed but also the critics of which it is subjected from animal welfare viewpoint. Then, in a European context, it synthesizes the efforts already done or in progress by the professional rabbit sector towards a housing with increased welfare. For this it analyses, in regard of the above expectations, the existing alternative systems: the enriched cage, the wire-mesh park system and park housing on a straw bedding. Moreover, current research to develop new promising alternatives as the “combi” group housing for females or the double-purpose park system is discussed. Finally legislative aspects, either in progress at EU level or already existing or in progress at national level, are reviewed.

Key words: Rabbit - Animal Welfare - Conventional and alternative housing