Rabbit Production and Marketing

Rabbit production serves many purposes. Rabbits are used for meat, wool (fur), and skins, as pets, and even as laboratory animals for research. Throughout this E-unit, explore the various options that emerge for the production and marketing of rabbits.

Objective:
Discuss the production and marketing of rabbits.

Key Terms:
- fryer
- pelt
- roaster

Rabbit Production and Marketing Options

The primary use of rabbits in the United States is meat production, but other uses also exist. For instance, rabbits can be used for wool (fur), for their skins, as pets, and as laboratory animals. With more than 200,000 meat rabbit producers, the United States consumes more than 8 million pounds of rabbit meat per year.

Meat rabbits are raised as fryers or roasters. A fryer is a domestic rabbit, usually 12 weeks old, whose carcass weighs more than 1 1/2 pounds but no more than 4 pounds. A roaster is a rabbit that is heavier than a fryer or cull animal from the breeding herd. Rabbit meat is a white meat that is high in nutrition and protein but low in fat, calories, and cholesterol.
To be successful in raising rabbits for meat, one must assess the amount of feed required for the animals to reach premium harvest weight. Rabbit production operations can range from small ones that market just a few rabbit carcasses a year to large ones that market thousands of carcasses a year. Most commercial operations sell fryers and roasters to processors. The processors then harvest the rabbits and market their skins and meat. Some producers harvest and market the rabbits they grow, but they must follow the same strict sanitation and harvesting regulations as large processors.

Rabbits are also used to produce wool. Angora rabbits are used because their wool grows between 2 and 3 inches long and can be harvested at a rate of 1 inch per month. On average, Angora rabbits shear 14 to 15 ounces of fleece per year. The use of Angora wool production from rabbits is about 20 million pounds annually. To raise Angora rabbits successfully, one must keep the rabbits’ environment clean and harvest the wool often. Because the price for rabbit wool is low, raising animals for both wool and meat is a good idea. The wool is marketed for use in making clothing.

Rabbits are also used for their skins. The pelts are usually marketed by the pound and bought by raw-fur buyers. A pelt is an animal’s skin that still has the hair attached. Skins must meet specific requirements and therefore should not be cut or mutilated by overstretching or drying. Rabbit producers primarily raise white breeds of rabbits because colored pelts are not worth as much as pure white pelts. The pelts are used in a variety of products, including ballet shoes, glue, gloves, toys, and even felt.

Rabbits play an integral role in research, particularly in medical advancements. More than 600,000 rabbits are used each year for this purpose.

Another way the rabbits are used is as pets or as 4-H and FFA projects. This use is generally classified as small. Rabbits can be raised outside or inside the house. Marketing for rabbits raised for pets is usually done locally.

FIGURE 2. 4-H provides an excellent opportunity to exhibit, show, and sell rabbits. (Courtesy, USDA)

ON THE JOB...

CAREER CONNECTION: Animal Researcher

Animals have made it possible for many to battle and often overcome dreaded diseases. Animals contribute a large part to the laboratory tests that advance medical research and the development of vaccines. Rabbits play a major role in this animal research because of their docile temperament and small size. Animal researchers work with rabbits to develop insulin for diabetes or even antibiotics.

Animal researchers must pay attention to detail and possess a high interest in scientific inquiry. In this career, a candidate must have an advanced college degree and focus in biology, chemistry, and microbiology. An animal researcher earns between $80,000 and $100,000 annually.
Summary:

Rabbit production serves many purposes. By careful breed selection, producers choose medium- to heavier-weight breeds to produce quality rabbit carcasses for meat production. Other products from rabbit production include wool (fur) and skins or pelts. Producers also market live rabbits as pets and as laboratory animals for research.

Checking Your Knowledge:

1. List five purposes of rabbit production.
2. Describe the nutritive value of rabbit meat.
3. At what level is the United States’ rabbit meat consumption?
4. About how much wool does an Angora rabbit produce annually?
5. What is a pelt?

Expanding Your Knowledge:

List products and uses that come from rabbit production. For each, identify the point of origin in rabbit production. For example, if you listed an Angora sweater, you would list the fur of the rabbit as the point of origin. Be sure to consider all options for uses of rabbits, including meat, skins, wool, pets, and research. Lastly, explore online and through conversations, the average price for each item. Does the price range vary depending on the point of origin in rabbit production? Why or why not?

Web Links:

U.S. Rabbit Industry Profile

Angora Rabbits
http://www.fresnochaffeezoo.com/animals/angoraRabbit.html

Rabbits as Pets
http://www.fda.gov/cvm/rabbits.htm

Rabbits in Research
http://www.kids4research.org/info_pages/animals.htm#Rabbits%20in%20research