Rabbit Resource Handbook
For Breeding, Market, and Pet Rabbit Projects

4-H 228R

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION
Chapter 1: Introduction

Background Information on the Rabbit Industry in the United States

Before you begin on a venture to learn specifically about breeding, market, and pet rabbits, you should be knowledgeable of the scope of the rabbit industry in the United States.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal Plant Health and Inspection Service (APHIS) Animal Care (1999), the value of the rabbit industry in the United States is about $25 million a year. This includes $10 million a year from the sale of rabbit meat and pelts, and a $15 million value for rabbits raised for research purposes. These estimates do not include show or pet rabbits. In 1999, the United States exported small amounts of live rabbits, rabbit meat, and pelts for a combined value of $1.7 million.

Additional statistics about the rabbit industry include:

- California had the largest number of rabbits (94,533);
- Ohio had 728 rabbit farms, with a total of 14,091 rabbits (1997 Census);
- During 1999, almost 300,000 rabbits were used for research in 735 facilities in the United States. This number has steadily declined since 1987;
- Ohio had 29 research facilities using a total of 20,000 rabbits;
- In 1999, USDA Animal Care inspected 136 facilities that were dealers or breeders of about 84,000 rabbits, selling these rabbits wholesale. (USDA Animal Care does not inspect dealers/breeders that sell animals directly to the public or sell less than $500 worth of rabbits a year);
- In 1998, about 800 million rabbits were slaughtered worldwide, producing over 1 million metric tons of rabbit meat;
- There are four federally inspected slaughter facilities in the United States that slaughter rabbits located in Arkansas, Florida, Maryland, and Oregon, and account for less than 0.04 percent of world production of rabbit meat;
- China is the world's leader in rabbit meat production, producing 31 percent of ARBA members;
- The demand for domestically produced rabbit pelts is very small in the United States, aside from the market for the pelts of Rex rabbits. High quality Rex pelts sell for a wholesale price of about $13.00 per pelt;
- The wool industry is a very small niche market, selling primarily to spinners, knitters, and yarn shops;
- The American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA) has over 35,000 members throughout the United States, Canada, and other countries; however, they estimate that only 1 in 10 people who own or raise rabbits are ARBA members;
- About 90 percent of ARBA members breed rabbits for exhibition or are commercial raisers;
- The other 10 percent of ARBA members own one or two rabbits as pets;
- In 1997, there were 13,420 farms with rabbits in the United States, with a total inventory of 530,189 rabbits (1997 Census of Agriculture);
- Texas had the largest number of rabbit farms (1,244).
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Advantages of Rabbit Projects

Rabbit projects are excellent for 4-H members, whether living in rural, suburban, urban, or inner-city environments. Other advantages of rabbit projects include:

1. Small initial investment;
2. Small space requirements;
3. Quick turnover of return;
4. Possibility of expanding project into a profitable rabbitry; and
5. Understanding of animal needs and welfare.

Guidelines for Completing a 4-H Breeding, Market, or Pet Rabbit Project

1. Complete one or more of the following project books that correspond to the type of project you are taking annually:
   - Breeding Rabbit Project and Record Book
   - Market Rabbit Project and Record Book
   - Pet Rabbit Project and Record Book
2. Secure project rabbit(s) and keep them in your possession and custodial care.
3. Make sure your project registration and/or entry form is completed and submitted to the county Extension office on time.
4. If you plan to participate in pre-fair or county fair activities, or state fair activities, know your county’s guidelines and rules, and know your state fair rules. Regulations may vary from county to county.

Benefits to a 4-H Member

1. Life Skills Development: As a rabbit owner, you will learn many life skills to help you become a responsible and competent individual. Some of these life skills include managing resources, making decisions, solving problems, learning to learn, reasoning, thinking critically, keeping records, planning and organizing, achieving goals, communicating, cooperating, sharing, caring for others, being empathetic, learning through community service, completing a project/task, motivating yourself, and being responsible. What other skills can you think of?

2. Selection: From the time you select your breeding or market rabbit(s) to the time of showing, you will be learning what characteristics to look for in a specific breed of rabbit.

3. Record Keeping: One requirement for completing your rabbit project is keeping accurate records. By keeping good records from the start of your project, you will learn costs of feed, equipment, and purchasing rabbits. You also may learn the expenditures of operating a rabbitry and raising young rabbits.

4. Nutrition: You will learn the nutrient requirements of rabbits and how their diet affects their overall condition, quality of meat, and fur or wool.

5. Health: Learning about rabbit diseases and their prevention will pay off in healthier rabbits, better production, and lower expenses.

6. Competition: You will benefit from learning to care for and show your project, and to compete gracefully.

7. Ownership Pride: Owning and caring for rabbits give you a feeling of pride and satisfaction.

8. Professional and Social Development: Having a rabbit project will bring you into contact with successful rabbit raisers, project leaders, and other 4-H members.


10. Consumer Awareness: Raising a market rabbit will help you better understand how meat enters our food chain.

Teamwork for the Common Goal

The purpose of all project work is to enhance the education, experience, and development of young people, a purpose that is not realized without the involvement of several people working as a team. The successful completion of the rabbit project depends upon the combined efforts of parents/guardians, experts, 4-H leaders, and you. All contribute to successful teamwork.

A Message to Parents or Guardians

Behind most successful club members are parents or guardians who are truly enthusiastic about the projects their children are taking.

These parents offer supervision, assistance, and encouragement to the 4-H member as she or he works through a project. The payoff from this involvement is an exciting learning experience, and sometimes even in winning honors and prizes at county and state fairs. If you are willing to help in these ways, it will make a difference.

So, however, be aware that while adult support is clearly important, it is equally important that adults not go too far. That is, as a parent or guardian of a 4-H member undertaking a project, you should assist and supervise to a reasonable extent; help out as much as is necessary, but do not do the various chores and requirements called for by the project. These are for the 4-H member to do. It is also inappropriate for a professional to own or care for the project rabbit(s). The 4-H members are to own their project animals and keep those animals under their care.

A Message to the 4-H Advisor

As people directly concerned with youth development, it is the responsibility of every 4-H advisor and agent to help each member who wants a rabbit project (and has the resources and suitable facilities) to secure one.

Keep in mind that people like you, in such positions, have exceptional influence with youth. Your encouragement and help lead not only to successful projects, but contribute as well to the development of responsible citizens.

Eight key elements have been identified in making a young person’s 4-H experiences positive. All eight may not prevail at one time; however, elements such as a caring adult and safe environment must be present at all times.

Information below identifies and explains the eight key elements for a positive 4-H experience.

1. A Positive Relationship with a Caring Adult

Young people’s understanding of what it means and what it takes to be productive, self-assured citizens depends largely on the adult role models and connections they have. Caring adults serve as guides, mentors, and role models to 4-H members. They help youth discover their personal visions, missions, and lifetime goals.

Caring adults help set appropriate boundaries and expectations for youth engaged in 4-H programs.

2. An Emotionally and Physically Safe Environment

Youth should not fear physical or emotional harm from our learning environment, from adults who work with them,
Benefits to a 4-H Member

1. **Life Skills Development.** As a rabbit owner, you will learn many life skills to help you become a responsible and competent individual. Some of these life skills include managing resources, making decisions, solving problems, learning to learn, reasoning, thinking critically, keeping records, planning and organizing, achieving goals, communicating, cooperating, sharing, caring for others, being empathetic, learning through community service, completing a project/task, motivating yourself, and being responsible. What other skills can you think of? Refer to the Four-Fold Youth Development Model, www.four-h.purdue.edu/, for more on how life skills development unfolds.

2. **Selection.** From the time you select your rabbit project(s) to the time of showing, you will be learning what characteristics to look for in a specific breed of rabbit.

3. **Record Keeping.** One requirement for completing your rabbit project is keeping accurate records. By keeping good records from the beginning of your project, you will learn costs of feed, equipment, and purchasing rabbits. You also may learn the expenditures of operating a rabbitry and raising young rabbits.

4. **Nutrition.** You will learn the nutrient requirements of rabbits and how their diet affects their overall condition, quality of meat, and fur or wool.

5. **Health.** Learning about rabbit diseases and their prevention will pay off in healthier rabbits, better production, and lower expenses.

6. **Competition.** You will benefit from learning to care for and show your project, and to compete gracefully.

7. **Ownership Pride.** Owning and caring for rabbits give you a feeling of pride and satisfaction.

8. **Professional and Social Development.** Having a rabbit project will bring you into contact with successful rabbit raisers, project leaders, and other 4-H members.

9. **Quality Assurance.** Increase the awareness of the issues of animal well-being, quality assurance, and ethics.

10. **Consumer Awareness.** Raising a market rabbit will help you better understand how meat enters our food chain.

Teamwork for the Common Goal

The purpose of all project work is to enhance the education, experience, and development of young people, a purpose that is not realized without the involvement of several people working as a team. The successful completion of the rabbit project depends upon the combined efforts of parents/guardians, experts, 4-H leaders, and you. All contribute to successful teamwork.

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2. **An Emotionally and Physically Safe Environment.** Youth should not fear physical or emotional harm from their learning environment, from adults who work with them,
or from other youth. In our world today, this element is especially important.
4-H strives to provide a safe environment at each and every activity involving our youth.

3. A Welcoming Environment
A welcoming environment is one that actively cultivates a sense of group identity and belonging, encourages and supports its members, offers encouragement with positive and specific feedback, and shares the successes of all members of the 4-H group by providing many forms of recognition.

4. Mastery and Competence in a Chosen Activity or Subject Matter
Young people learn best when the program or activity is centered on a topic that is of personal interest or a passion. Providing an opportunity for mastery and competence allows youth to experience success and achievement which serve as building blocks for their success—not only in 4-H, but also in their school and community work.

5. Opportunity to Value and Practice Service for Others
Service is a way for 4-H members to gain exposure to the larger community and the world. It is necessary for youth to actively practice and value service to others. Many times, this experience enables young people to recognize the difference they can make for others and for their communities.

6. Self-Determination
Youth must believe that they can have an impact over their life's events, rather than life's events having control of their lives. The opportunities we provide through 4-H help our youth foster a personal sense of influence over their lives, exercising their potential to become self-directing, autonomous adults.

7. Engagement in Learning
An engaged youth is one who is not only mindful of the subject area, but is building relationships and connections to develop greater understanding. 4-H provides opportunities for self-reflection that enable youth to connect what they learn today to their future. Hands-on learning provides opportunities to develop important life skills.

8. Active Participation in the Future
Providing youth with the opportunity to see themselves in the future gives them the hope and optimism to shape their life choices accordingly. Leaders can help youth see all the facts and figures in various subject areas, but if they don't link the information to the future, those facts and figures will likely go unused. 4-H is committed to positive youth development programs that make the connection from today's activities to tomorrow's successes.

To the Member
After you have made the decision to take a breeding, market, or pet rabbit project, it is important to know what type of rabbit you are looking for, how to properly house it, how to feed it, diseases it could contract, management techniques, and many other important concepts. By teaching you these principles through information and experience, this project will make it possible for you to produce a quality end project—breeding or market rabbits that raisers or consumers want to buy, or pet rabbits for you to appreciate the significance of the human-animal bond. To have a successful project you must be willing to study, review, and apply the information contained in this handbook.

Results of 4-H Youth Development Programs
Research has shown that as a result of 4-H Youth Development programs:

1. Youth Develop Marketable Skills for Lifelong Success
Youth gain important leadership, communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. These abilities are gained through the numerous projects and activities in which youth participate as 4-H members. Such skills are important not only to their immediate success, but are tools for continued success.

2. Youth Engage in Community Service and Citizenship to Transform Local Communities
This goes beyond just conducting a project; its focus is on recognizing that youth can make valuable contributions to their local communities. Youth can make a difference.

3. Youth Appreciate and Build Upon Diversity to Foster a Harmonious Global Society
This is a critical awareness tool for success today and far into the future. Rather than looking at the differences in people as potential sources of conflict and disengagement, our goal is for our youth to recognize these differences as opportunities for positive and rewarding experiences.

4. Youth Build Sustained Relationships with Adults to Enable them to Become Better Citizens
We can all remember the significant contributions an adult had during our adolescent lives. Similarly, adult 4-H volunteers should make a tremendous positive impact on the lives of 4-H youth.

5. Volunteers Build Skills and Abilities to More Effectively Work with Youth
Land-grant universities throughout the nation provide educational opportunities in subject areas, working effectively with youth, and leading positive youth development programs. Extension professionals and other university faculty and staff teach volunteers the many skills and abilities needed to work effectively with youth through educational workshops, clinics, and conferences.

(Parts adapted from "Introduction," Sheep Resource Handbook, 4-H 194R, © The Ohio State University, 2000.)
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