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Flemish Animal Welfare Council – OPINION 25/04/2018

The housing of rabbits in rabbit farms

Belgium is a European leader in terms of animal welfare legislation for the housing of rabbits in farms.

Thus meat rabbits (rabbits slaughtered for their meat approximately 12 weeks after birth) are now housed in so-called parks¹. This practice has been mandatory since 2016. Such parks are more animal-welfare friendly than battery cages, because they increase the rabbits' ability to exhibit natural behaviour. The parks have no roof, are equipped with platforms onto which the rabbits can jump or seek refuge under, and boast comfortable plastic flooring or mats. The parks also contain tunnels and material for the rabbits to gnaw.

The legislation also states that, as of 2021, does (breeding females) must be housed in enriched parks. The conditions that this housing, and that of male breeding rabbits, must conform with are yet to be determined.

To this end, the Flemish Animal Welfare Council established a working group comprising stakeholders and scientists.

It is widely accepted and research has proven that meat rabbits can be readily housed in groups until the time of slaughter. This is less evident in the case of does. No scientific study can produce satisfactory results with continuous group housing for does, unless an extremely large space is available, which is not commercially feasible. In this housing, does that are giving birth and suckling their young are continuously kept in groups. Does with youngsters appear to display considerable aggression towards one another, particularly in the first days and weeks. The older the young, the less protective behaviour the does exhibit towards their litter. Thus semi-group housing does appear to be possible; the does are hereby housed individually for the birth and during the first days and weeks following the birth. Once their young are old enough, they can be kept in groups with other does and their young.

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council proposes the following standards for the housing of parent animals. These standards consider the welfare of the rabbits and the economic viability.

¹ Royal Order of 29 June 2014 pertaining to the welfare of rabbits in breeding farms

Female breeding rabbits shall be housed in enriched parks from 1 January 2025 with the exception of the period within which individual housing is permitted, to be determined by the minister. The following regulations apply to such enriched parks:

- contains a minimum of 3 animals, minimum surface area: 6000 cm² per breeding rabbit;
- one of the sides is at least 1.80 m long;
- platform (no wire mesh);
- the platform surface area is included in the calculation of the available surface area, up to a maximum of 40% of the surface area and insofar as the height beneath the platform is at least 25 cm;
- the park roof is open above at least 60% of the floor surface area;
- if the park is equipped with wire mesh flooring, at least 60% of the surface is covered with foot mats or comfort zones/mats;
- enrichment material (already mandatory in current legislation);
- nesting material (already mandatory in current legislation);
- minimum surface area of the nesting box: 800 cm².

The minimum length for one of the sides and the minimum group size are not applicable during the period that the animals are housed individually.

The breeder adopts measures to limit aggression between rabbits, such as working with stable groups and genetic selection as much as possible.

Male breeding rabbits shall be housed in enriched parks for male breeding rabbits from January 1, 2021. The following regulations apply to such enriched parks:

- individual housing is permitted;
- minimum surface area: 6000 cm²/animal;
- minimum park height: 60 cm (at least 80% of the park's floor surface is at least 60 cm high);
- platform (no wire mesh). The surface area of the platform is included in the calculation of the available surface area, up to a maximum of 40% of the surface area and insofar as the height below the platform is at least 25 cm;
- if the park is equipped with a wire mesh floor, at least 60% of the surface is covered with foot mats or comfort zones or mats;
- enrichment material (already mandatory in current legislation).

Female non-pregnant breeding rabbits (breeding rabbits that appear to be non-pregnant following insemination in the period between weaning the preceding up until the subsequent litter) shall be housed in enriched parks for female non-pregnant breeding rabbits from 1 January 2021. The following regulations apply to such an enriched park:

- individual housing is permitted;
- minimum surface area: 4500 cm²/animal;
- minimum park height: 60 cm (at least 80%ⁱ of the park's floor surface is at least 60 cm high);
- platform (no wire mesh). The platform surface area is included in the calculation of the available surface area, up to a maximum of 40% of the surface area and insofar as the height below the platform is at least 25 cm;
- if the park is equipped with wire mesh flooring, at least 60% of the surface is covered with foot mats or comfort zones/mats;
- enrichment material (already mandatory in current legislation).

Instead of 2021, the Council does not anticipate a full transition to does in parks until 2025. Rabbit farmers who are renewing their facility can consequently invest in parks and rabbit farmers who recently invested in enriched cages for does will not have a competitive advantage.

The Council also requests the initiation of scientific research on optimising group housing for does. This research must guide the transition to keeping does in parks and, amongst other things, examine the optimal period for group housing in terms of the breeding females' welfare. A guidance committee comprising stakeholders and scientists must supervise this project.

The definition of an enriched park for meat rabbits must also be amended in the current legislation, so that, instead of 80%, at least 60% of the surface area is covered with foot mats or comfort zones/mats. This amendment ensures more hygienic housing and affords the rabbits the option of relaxing in a cool place. An amendment is also required for the park roof, to the effect that at least 60% of the floor surface is open instead of 'open'. Thus modular parks (combi-parks) are used in which the does give birth and the young remain after weaning. This offers benefits both in terms of welfare and hygiene (all-in/all-out system).

ⁱ Footnote: The Belgian Farmers' Union wishes to reduce the percentage from 80% to 50% so that the housing for female breeding rabbits and non-pregnant breeding rabbits is compatible and can be converted. The number of pregnant breeding rabbits in a group varies over time; the unused places for does with young can subsequently be used for non-pregnant does. This is necessary for realising economic, profitable and competitive housing.

Since it can stand up straight, it additionally guarantees the welfare of the rabbit.