



THE STATUS AND PROSPECT OF RABBIT FARMING IN MALAYSIA

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The Status and Prospect of Rabbit Farming in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The rabbit industry is a small sector of the livestock industry. It can be equated to the quail industry which supplies meat to limited number of consumers. While rabbit has been hailed as the alternative to chicken meat, especially in times of poultry meat scarcity, its development is rather slow. The rabbit industry in Malaysia can be classified as those that supply rabbit meat, and those that supply live rabbits for breeding and for pets. The pet industry together with eco- and edu-tourism sector is increasing at a slow but steady rate thereby providing a constant demand for live rabbits and rabbit meat for consumption. At these eco- and tourism parks, children are allowed to touch rabbits which can be quite an attraction for children. Rabbits for pets, edu parks and exhibition tend to come in at various colours and sizes. Quite often, these eco-tourism and edu parks sell rabbit meat for those interested. In general, most rabbit farms in Malaysia are small to medium sized, carrying between 500-1000 breeding females. Most common breeds for meat are the New Zealand Whites and Californian Whites, while those for pets comprised of breeds from Europe and other parts of the world. They ranged from small miniature breeds to breeds that are large and weigh 3-5 kg. The farmers in Malaysia follow the protocols set by the Australian and American standards for rabbit rearing, as Malaysia has not come up with specific procedures. Commercial meat rabbits are fed rabbit pellets supplied by a number of feed mills, usually with a crude protein content of 18-20%. Pet rabbits are fed rabbit pellets and supplemented with leafy vegetables or grass hay. As far as small holder farmers are concerned keeping rabbits can be lucrative and profitable and provides added income to the farmer. Small holder farms in Malaysia keep other animals with some rabbits raised in cages and fed whatever feed that is available.

Key Words: Rabbits, Smallholder Farmers, Meat Quality, Feeding

INTRODUCTION

Rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) belong to the family Leporidae of the order Lagomorpha from phylum Chordata. Rabbit has always been perceived as a pet animal more than a wild or exotic meat. In the early years in Europe rabbits and hares were hunted for their gamey meat much cherished by the European those days. Rabbit hunting was a sport those days and until now it is still practiced in some parts of the world. Rabbits now are raised commercially in farms and are sold for meat, pelts or furs and more common as pets. Countries that produce large amounts of rabbit meat for own consumption and export include Italy, Russia, China, France and Spain which produce more than 100 thousand tones per annum.

History of Rabbit Industry in Malaysia

Back in 1988, the then Agriculture Minister Tan Sri Sanusi Junid encouraged Malaysian

small holder farmers and entrepreneurs to go into rabbit farming for both export and local consumption. As rabbits breed easily, and provide lean, low-fat high-protein meat, they could help to diversify the country's exports and provide local consumers with an additional choice of halal meat. It was thought that rabbit production can be a side activity for small holder farmers, as being a small animal they can be fed whatever forage that grow in the farm area at low costs, hence an added income to the family. The following years saw an increase in number of rabbit farms but in the late 90s the growth of the rabbit industry leveled off. Some farms closed down due to poor marketing and high costs of production, especially feed, as most farms used rabbit pellets as the main source of feed. One of the earliest entrepreneur was Mr. David Wong who set up his farm, East Asia Rabbit Ranch, with a few hundred rabbits in a half-hectare plot of land in Semenyih, Selangor. Wong bought his rabbits from Australian Malaysian Livestock Trading (AMLT), a joint venture set

up by the Selangor Agriculture Development Corporation (PKPS) and an Australian company to promote rabbit farming. The rabbits were imported from Australia, France, Italy, the United States and New Zealand. East Asia Rabbit Corporation Sdn. Bhd. is now Malaysia's leading integrated rabbit farm. It owns and manages two farms and currently has over 30,000 rabbits. As meat activity is still the core business, EARC is heavily involved in breeding and rearing of parent stocks, slaughtering and processing of rabbit meat into undressed meat and satay meat.

Advantages of rabbit farming

The advantages of farming rabbits are related to its feeding and reproductive behavior. Being a small monogastric herbivore it can be fed easily with local forages or commercial rabbit pellets. Rabbits can be fed cellulose rich materials such as grass, leaves of forages, hay and fresh vegetables. Rabbits are prolific and can produce 6-8 young at each birth and they can breed about 8 times a year. This is due to the fact that females are induced ovulation, have short gestation and lactation periods. Other than that, being small they are easily transported and marketed, with the recurrent costs of maintaining them is low, even after the optimal age for slaughter. Likewise the labour costs are low and the work can be done by family members: women and children, or perhaps aged or handicapped people. Furthermore the initial investment is low and not much land area is needed.

STATUS OF RABBIT FARMING IN MALAYSIA

There has not been much data on rabbit farming in Malaysia. It was thought that rabbit meat being low in fat and low in cholesterol would capture a large portion of the meat market dominated by poultry and beef meats. However, rabbit meat was still expensive and beyond the reach of lower income groups. Furthermore, the consumer perception still view rabbits as a pet animal and were reluctant to accept rabbit meat as a main protein source. In fact, in a survey only 58% of the respondents have tasted rabbit meat, and less than 15% eat rabbit meat regularly (Nursuhana et al. 2012). The department of veterinary services in Malaysia view rabbit farming as a small farming activity for the production of rabbit meat and pet rabbits. Many backyard rabbit farming with numbers ranging from a few rabbits up to 500 rabbits are not registered as a farming enterprise and the department treat it as an activity of the family that provides extra income. Records of number of rabbit farms in Malaysia are scanty and there are few large rabbit farms (Table 1).

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and governmental and non-governmental development organizations have given good support to rabbit projects in the developing countries. In the last ten years, FAO's Animal Production and Health Division (AGA) has supported and developed rabbit projects in Egypt, Mexico, Haiti and many African countries.

Table 1. The number of registered farm and average number of rabbits in various states in Malaysia

| State | Number of farms | Average number of rabbits |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Johor | 4 | 80 |
| Kedah | 103 | 1717 |
| Kelantan | 16 | 139 |
| Pahang | 3 | 22 |
| Pulau Pinang | 12 | 1432 |
| Perak | 49 | 3190 |
| Selangor | 10 | 3920 |
| Terengganu | 18 | 664 |
| Sarawak | 1 | 1600 |

Source: Department of Veterinary Services, Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industries (2013)

The constraints associated with rabbit farming in Malaysia are mainly social, cultural and economic factors: customer acceptance of rabbit meat and ease of marketing; lack of local resources available for balanced, low-cost, locally adapted rations; the existence of rabbit housing and management styles that inhibit the range of rabbit territorial, social, sexual and feeding behaviours. Currently there is no data or report on the amount of rabbit meat being produced or consumed because most of the meat is consumed locally and a significant supply of rabbit comes from the smallholder or backyard farms. It was reported by Lebas et al (1997) that Malaysia is among the countries that produces between 5000-9000 tonnes of rabbit meat.

Breeds of rabbits

In Malaysia there are a number of imported breeds for meat production which include New Zealand White (NZW), Californian, Carolina, New Simonare and Spanish. However, medium-size breeds, the New Zealand White (NZW) and the Californian, are the most popular for meat production in Malaysia. They have white fur and can weigh up to 2-3 kg at slaughter. The NZW is considered the most popular breed overall, because of its mothering ability and carcass characteristics. However, crossing male Californians to female NZWs and then breeding the female from this cross back to male Californians results in larger litter sizes and heavier fryers than using straight NZWs. Other important characteristics of NZW are that they produce 7-9 pups per litter, with weaned rabbits 6-8 animals and can reach 2 kg body weight within two months of age. While rabbit pelts or skins are also important products of the rabbit industry in the western world, this product is not important in Malaysia, possibly because there are no markets for the pelts and wool.

System of farming

1. Backyard or small holder farms. As the term applies, the rabbit hutches occupy a small place in the farm area, at the back of the farm house or by other animal buildings. These farmers tend to keep a

few breeding rabbits usually less than 500 in number. The rabbits are fed pellets and supplemented with locally available forages either grown at the farm or elsewhere. These rabbits are kept and sold for meat purposes. However, they do sell them for pets, if pet owners are not particularly concerned about breed. NZW breed do make good pets too.

2. Hobbyist/Enthusiast or show breeders. Also referred to as show breeders. Normally the farm is small, sometimes less than 100 breeders, and concentrate on producing high quality breeds with pedigree. They breed rabbits to produce different colours, fur types and several other characteristics. They do sell their products to specialized pet shops. All rabbits should come with 3 generations pedigrees.
3. Pet farm and edu-park. This farm (or park) is growing rapidly in Malaysia. They have rabbits for show (some are very good quality) while others keep inferior stocks to keep children happy when visiting the park. In Malaysia, many edu-parks have an area where animals that can be touched and handle for children to play with. The typical pet farm is to churn out supplies for pet purposes.
4. Meat Farm. In Malaysia, the meat rabbits are mainly for the meat trade and supplies rabbits for slaughter for food outlets. Their rabbits do make good pets and in fact some are even used in petting zoos/areas. Meat farms tend to keep more than 1000 breeding rabbits and usually they have a small slaughtering facility. The rabbits are usually fed commercial pellets and are kept in cages for ease of handling. The manure of rabbits are also considered as good fertilizer for horticulture and farmers do make some income from the sale of rabbit manure.

Feeding of rabbits

In Malaysia most rabbit farms and pet rabbits owners feed their rabbits with commercial pellets manufactured by commercial feedmillers. Small holder farmers

who have plots of land planted with forage such as grass and tree forages, supplement their rabbits with forages although forages may not be the main component of the feed. Pellet feeds contain 18-20% crude protein and the ingredients include wheat milling by-products, soyabean meal and some roughages.

Palm kernel meal (PKM) has been used as an ingredient in rabbit feed. It is a fibrous and protein-rich product that can meet the requirements of high-producing rabbits (de Blas & Mateos 2010). PKM also provides medium-chain fatty acids, whose high concentration in rabbit milk might contribute to explain the protective effect that delaying weaning exerts on rabbit viability (Carrion et al. 2011). It has been shown that PKM can be included in rabbit diets at 20-30% levels without affecting growth performance. PKM is a reasonably cheap protein source and its inclusion in rabbit diets may lower feed costs and makes it an economically viable replacement for more expensive ingredients such as soybean meal, sunflower meal and groundnut meal. However, if PKM is used in high-performance rabbit diets, attention must be paid to the fact this source of proteins is lysine-deficient and also deficient in sulphur

amino acids, providing only 58% and 80% respectively of the recommended levels.

Diseases of rabbits

The common diseases of rabbits in Malaysia, are shown in Table 2. In general if rabbits are kept under clean and dry environment they are quite free of diseases. However, as a precaution vaccination against VHD and myxomatosis are recommended. Diseases like ringworm, external parasites and diarrhea are management diseases and can be improved by cleaning the cages and removal of faeces more frequently. The diets of rabbits should also have a significant amount of fibre to encourage fermentation in the caecum.

Marketing

There is no system of marketing rabbits in Malaysia. Many farms sell their rabbits whether live or slaughtered to retailers or third person who come to the farm to select their rabbits. Rabbits for slaughter usually weigh 2 - 3 kg. Retailers would then sell their processed rabbit meat to food processors such as satay sellers, restaurants and home consumers.

Table 2. Common diseases of rabbits in Malaysia

| Diseases | Symptoms | Causal agents | Treatment |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Snuffles | snotty nose, runny eyes, sneezing and wheezing. | Bacteria stress | Antibiotics |
| Parasites | Itchiness, falling fur, scratching | External parasites, such as fleas, ticks, mange, and ear mites | External medication available |
| Ringworm | as bald encrusted areas, spread from rabbit to rabbit, itchy and scratchy | fungus | External medication available |
| Fly strike | Maggots in the rabbits fur | Flies, moist and soiled fur due to faeces, wet faeces | Change diets from high pellets to high fibre |
| Myxomatosis | Swollen and watery eyes, does not run when approached | Virus, carried by insects | Cannot be cured, need to vaccinate as a prevention measure |
| VHD, viral haemorrhage Disease | Respiratory and Heart failure, fatal disease | Virus, carried by insects | Vaccination at 10-12 weeks of age |
| Diarrhoea | Stomach upset leading to enteritis, depression, diarrhea, dehydration, inappetance | Diet too high in concentrates, change of diets, or coccidial infection | Medication, diet to be high in fibre, if caused by coccidia get anti-coccidia medication |

Sources: Various sources from the internet

Some of the farms listed in Table 1, are edu-parks incorporated within a farm. This type of enterprise will sell their animals to customers which are pet owners. Rabbit meat, dressed whole carcass are sold at prices ranging from RM30-35 per kilogram. Raising rabbits for pets are more lucrative as the young rabbits are sold anywhere between RM20 to a few hundred ringgit, pending on the breed. A breeder buck can cost up to RM2000. In general there are no specified slaughter houses for rabbits. Slaughtering are normally done on-farm and usually following the halal procedures. Pet rabbits can be obtained/purchased from many pet shop, and these pet shops obtain their supply of live rabbits from individual and reliable farmers that are known to supply good quality and disease free rabbits. Pedigreed pet rabbits are rare, most probably in general, pet owners are not concerned about the breeding. Rabbits for breeding are more difficult to obtained, and most large farms import their bucks females from other countries. Food processors and outlets, and restaurants too, obtain their supply of rabbit meat direct from farmers that they know or farms that can provide continuous supply for their outlets.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that rabbit farming can be a lucrative business provided that market can be determined. Many success stories in rabbit farming are due to well planned marketing system. As mentioned earlier most supermarkets in Malaysia do not stock rabbit meat. Those consumers who are interested in purchasing rabbit meat usually contact specific suppliers or the farmer. Meat rabbit farmers usually have a small slaughtering unit where they regularly slaughter the rabbits and keep the dressed carcasses frozen for sale.

Certainly, rabbit meat is not like beef or mutton that is readily available in fresh markets or superstores. With good marketing strategies and promotional activities the number Malaysian rabbit meat consumers will be on the increase, thereby increasing the opportunity for rabbit farmers to expand their enterprises.

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The Status and Prospects of Rabbit Farming in Malaysia

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A.R. ALIMON during his presentation

Introduction

- History of rabbit production
- Reasons for growing rabbit
- Uses of rabbits
- Number of rabbits/farms
- System of production
- Breeds of rabbits
- Prospects
- Conclusion

History of rabbit production in Malaysia

- Rabbit rearing is not really a new industry in Malaysia, but it is a slow developing industry.
- In 1988 the Malaysian government launched a program to grow rabbits as an alternative protein source for the population
- Rabbit rearing could be an easy enterprise for small holder farmers that could provide added income with a little extra input
- The Selangor state government went a little further by developing a slaughter house specifically for rabbit with the intention of export

MARBA annual carnival



MARBA Small Animal Carnival 2013

21 & 22 June 2013

Pet World Malaysia 2013

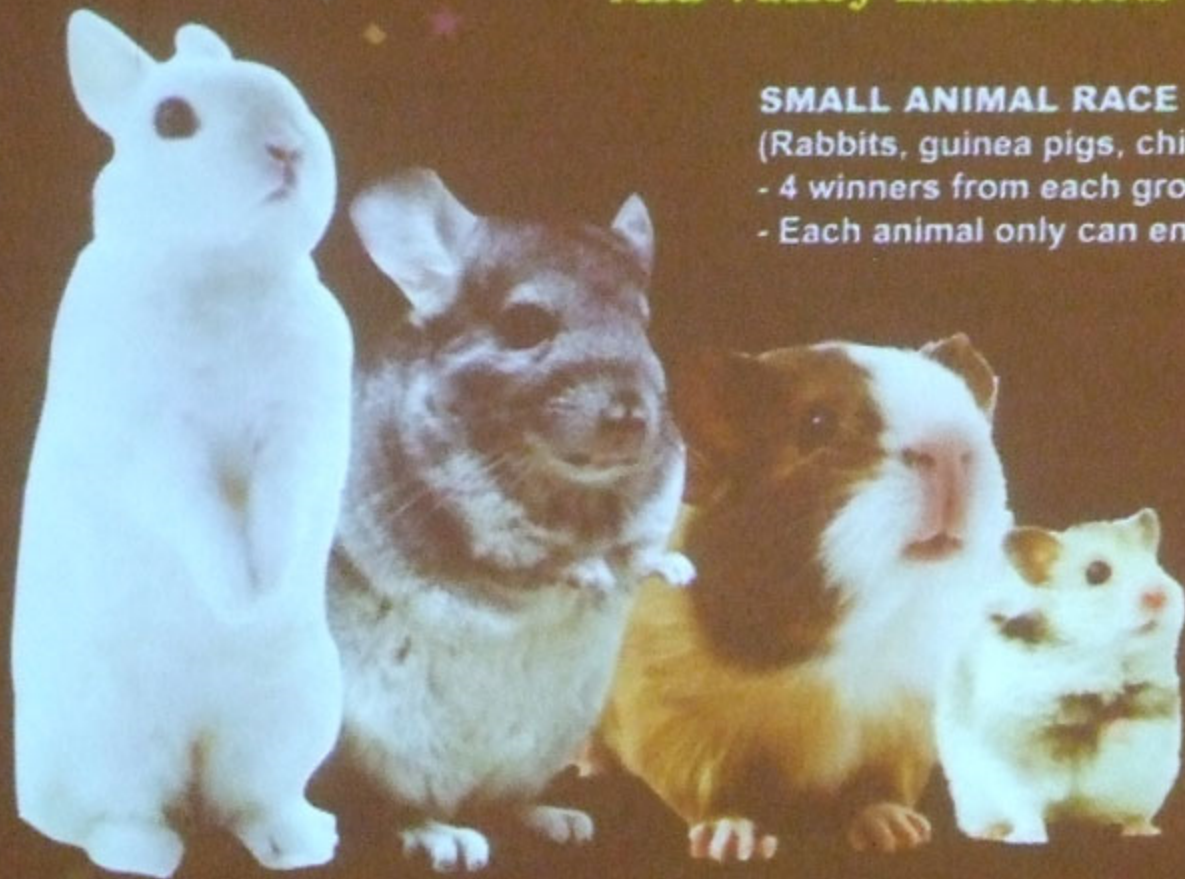
Mid Valley Exhibition Centre

SMALL ANIMAL RACE (22 June, 3pm - 4pm)

(Rabbits, guinea pigs, chinchillas and hamsters)

- 4 winners from each group will be awarded
- Each animal only can enter once in the race

**Free entry &
Register during
the event**



Organizer



Sponsor



Main Sponsors



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System of production

- For meat production
 - Small holder farmers, usually raise New Zealand White or Californian
 - In cages in open house , well ventilated
 - Commercial production is similar except with bigger number of does
- For pedigree breeders and fanciers for pets, usually in closed housing, temperature controlled

Types of rabbits in Malaysia

- There are many different breed of rabbit for pets but the most popular one in Malaysia is Angora rabbit, Lops Ears rabbit, Giant rabbit, Jersey Woolly, English Spot, Dwarf Rabbit, local rabbit and mixed rabbit. A rabbit can found in a many different colors, coat patterns, and fur type.

Why grow rabbits?

- As an alternative protein source, other than chicken, fish, beef, mutton, lamb
- Considered as an exotic meat – more like game meat
- Not so popular among certain people as most look at it as a pet animal
- Pet industry is a big business – rabbits has always been a part of it
- Added income for small farmers – mainly NZW and Californian Whites

Eco, Edu-tourism



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Bukit Tinggi Rabbit Farm

Well, it was not a huge farm but, the accessible to the rabbits was really made much easier. We could touch, feed, carry, play with those rabbits that released in the fenced area. All the visitors were free to enjoy the accessibility but, on the other hand, we pity the rabbits too as they are made to entertain us for the exchange of fees... well, sad to say that.

Apart from rabbits, we could have donkey ride, feed the deer, peacocks... just a small scale of animals. Since the environment was quite cooling at Bukit

Tinggi,

About Malaysian Rabbit Owners' Association 2011

- The Malaysian Rabbit Owners' Association 2011 is the official association approved by the Malaysia Registrar of Societies (Jabatan Pendaftaran Penubuhan Malaysia). Previously known as the Malaysian Rabbit Owners' Club (MROC) which has since defunct and dissolved to make way for the new MROA 2011.
- **The aims and objectives of MROA 2011 as stated in our constitution are as follows: -**
- (a) to promote, encourage, and develop the rabbit (and/or cavy) industry and fancy in all of its phases in the area served by this Association (or club);
- (b) to afford memberships to persons interested in breeding, marketing, and/or exhibiting rabbits and/or cavies and do all things necessary to effect this purpose;
- (c) advocating and educating all rabbit owners and Members of the Club on the tenets of responsible pet rabbit ownership, with the aim of improving the quality of life for all pet rabbits;
- (d) undertaking the rescue of abandoned, unwanted, abused and/or neglected rabbits with the aim of caring for and ultimately rehoming such rabbits with responsible owners; and
- (e) organizing exhibitions, shows, competitions and any other activity related to rabbits and/or cavies

Rabbit population

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|--------------|-----------------|------------------|
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Rabbit meat production

- Malaysia , less than 10 tonnes per annum
- No records of export or imports of rabbit meats
- Survey shows that more than 50% of the population has not eaten rabbit meat
- About 38% have tasted
- Less than 20% regularly eat rabbit meat

Types of Rabbit Production

- Fanciers, breeders
 - Pets, Breeding Stock, and Show Animals
- Laboratory – no specific breeds but usually NZW and CW
- Fur/Hair (mainly for show and pets)
 - Angora
 - Rex
- Meat
- Largest Rabbit Market, usually New Zealand White and California

Breed Selection

- Meet demands
 - White – NZW, Californian,
 - Fine-boned
- Expected litter size
 - 8-10 bunnies
- Personal preference

- Californian



Pets and pedigreed rabbits

- Usually kept by hobbyist or fanciers
- Mainly for pets and touch pets in parks
- Most exotic rabbits are imported from USA, France, Italy and others

Boh and Yo Rabbitry



Breeding strategies

- Small holder farmers tend to breed rabbits according to what breed they have
- No standard practice in Malaysia, except that new parents stock are brought in from USA or Europe
- As Malaysia is not very strict in terms of import regulations regarding the import of live rabbits many breeds have been imported from countries like France, Spain, Italy
- Breeders tend to breed exotic breeds as pet owner prefer breeds that are attractive, long furred and colorful



















General Management

• Feeding

- Fresh, Clean Water is essential
- Pellets: some locally manufactured
 - Usually all that is needed
 - Sometimes green forages are given
 - Hay not necessary
 - Formulated to meet rabbit needs
- Hay and Grains



Some local forages that can be fed to rabbits

- Mulberry
- Guinea, Napier Grass
- Legume leaves
- Green vegetables,
- Root crops

General Management

- Breeding

- Keep records!!
- Doe is induced ovulator
 - In heat 14 out of 16 days
- Gestation = 31-33 days
- Breeding Schedule
 - Take doe to buck
 - Day 10-16: palpate
 - Day 28: add nest box
 - Day 31-33: doe kindles

General Management

● Health

- *Pasteurellosis multocida*
- Mastitis
- Coccidiosis
- External parasites
 - Flies
 - Fleas
 - Mites
- Internal parasites
 - Not a major problem



Marketing

- Pricing- depends on costs of production
 - Still more expensive than other meats, almost the same as deer meat
- Live sale (for slaughter, and sometimes pets)
- Butchered rabbit, usually dressed
 - Health regulations
 - Not strictly regulated
 - Usually slaughtered at the farm

Marketing rabbits in malaysia

- No special marketing structure
- Generally rabbit meat cannot be bought from supermarkets or butchers
- Consumers buy rabbit meat from special retailers or directly from farm
- Pets rabbits are sold at pet shops and are available throughout the country
- Customers also buy live meat rabbits to keep as pets
- Farmers associations are not involved in marketing rabbits although many small holder rabbit farmers are also members of farmers association

Shops that deal with rabbits



Rabbit Breeders

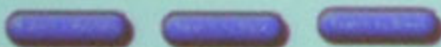


Rabbit Breeders List

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Meet Our Rabbit Breeders: Click local rabbit breeders by breed using our breed breeders' pages.

Seeing
Rabbits 101

We are Malaysia Rabbit Breeders that focus on producing top quality New Zealand White and Chinchilla Meat Rabbits.

We are located in Selangor, Malaysia.

This is our distributor in Selangor :-

TURIAM ENTERPRISE,

No.37, Jalan Resak,

Kaman Impian Ehsan,

43300 Balakong,

Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

This is rabbit farm location :-

Kampung Bukit Kerayong, Jeram,

Selangor, Malaysia.

Kampung Orang Asli Bukit Lagong,

Batu Caves, Selangor

Slaughter yield of New Zealand Whites, by age¹

| | Age in weeks | | | |
|--|--------------|------|------|------|
| | 9 | 11 | 13 | 15 |
| | Age in weeks | | | |
| | 9 | 11 | 13 | 15 |
| Live weight at slaughter ² (kg) | 1.70 | 2.12 | 2.47 | 2.67 |
| Carcass weight (kg) | 1.18 | 1.48 | 1.76 | 1.93 |
| Slaughter yield (%) | 69.2 | 69.8 | 71.6 | 72.1 |

Rabbit meat

- Highly nutritious- low cholesterol
- Fine Grained
- Mild flavored
- Fryer
- Roaster
- Inspection
 - Voluntary
 - Grading



Braised rabbits



Satay arnab – getting popular



A unique cooking style is what makes Malaysian Satays the best

Rabbit vs. other meat

This is based on 1 kg of raw meat.

| MEAT | PROTEIN | FAT | CALORIES |
|---------|---------|-------|----------|
| Rabbit | 20.8 | 10.25 | 795 |
| Chicken | 20.0 | 11.0 | 810 |
| Veal | 18.8 | 14.0 | 910 |
| Turkey | 20.1 | 22.2 | 1190 |
| Beef | 16.3 | 28.0 | 1440 |
| Lamb | 15.7 | 27.7 | 1420 |
| Pork | 11.9 | 45.0 | 2050 |

Economics of rabbit farming

Capital and operating costs are high

- Initial costs are high
 - Housing
 - Breeding Stock
 - Supplies
- Annual Costs
 - Feed
 - Health program
 - Upkeep
- Labor intensive

Issues about rabbit meat

- It is a furry pet animal – most people associate it with pets like cats
- Meat rabbits are raised in very poor conditions – animal welfare groups
- At moment it is still expensive in Malaysia around RM30 per kg
- Beef satay sells at RM0.60 per stick, while rabbit satay sells for RM1.20

Prospects

- It is a growing industry
- For meat and especially pets
- For skins – maybe not yet as there is no industry
- Research



Thanks for Your Attention