

RABBITMEAT INSPECTION IN THE NETHERLANDS

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1. Production, consumption, import and export of rabbitmeat

Analogous with the poultry sector, rabbit keeping in the Netherlands has been through a process of evolution towards intensive animal husbandry in the past few years (see table 1). Traditional rabbit keeping is now mostly confined to amateurs, who obtain a single or a few rabbits from a breeder and fatten the animal(s) on edible kitchen and garden waste. By Christmas, the consumer either does the killing himself or has the animal(s) slaughtered by a poulterer.

Commercial rabbit management takes place on ca. 700 specialized rabbit farms, most of them situated in the south of the country. The animals are reared in closed systems (breeding + rearing units) till ca. 12 weeks of age. At 2.5 kg they are slaughtered by specialized rabbit slaughtering firms, some poultry slaughterhouses and poulterers.

Table 1: Production, consumption, imports and exports/year

| Year | 1970 | 1975 | 1980 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|----------------------|
| Production | 2150 | 4700 | 7500 tonnes |
| Imports (mostly Chinese) | 1230 | 1890 | 4500 tonnes |
| Exports (mostly from Belgium) | 1250 | 2260 | 2500 tonnes |
| Consumption | 160 | 320 | 670 grams per capita |

2. Risks attending rabbitmeat consumption

Rabbitmeat quality is more or less related to the price. Any way, each consumer expects to be offered meat from healthy animals, which can be eaten without any risks to his health.

Meat originating from rabbits suffering from any disease with direct public health risks, such as turalaemia and tuberculosis, should be excluded from consumption. Meat from rabbits suffering from diseases without any risk to the consumer's health, such as coccidiosis, cysticercosis, etc., is mostly unacceptable for consumption for ethical reasons.

The way and time between slaughtering and consumption have become longer and longer (killing - cutting - storage - distribution - retailer - consumer). This has increased the risks to the consumer's health. Insufficient hygiene at slaughter and during processing may cause contamination of meat with macrobial and microbial contaminants, including micro-organisms that cause potential food poisonings, such as Salmonellae, Staphylococci, etc.

3. Diseases and microbial contamination of rabbits for slaughter

In the Netherlands little research has been conducted so far into the incidence of diseases among table rabbits and into (bacterial) contamination during slaughter and processing (2).

Post-mortem inspection of 400 traditionally reared rabbits, which were submitted voluntarily to a preventive inspection, revealed one or more defects in one-third of the inspected rabbits. Although most cases concerned fairly innocent parasitic infections, more serious defects were also found. Seventy-seven per cent was approved, of 13% of the rabbits some parts were rejected, 8% was conditionally approved and 2% were rejected.

No salmonella germs were found in the faeces in the rectum of commercially and traditionally reared rabbits.

4. Rabbit (meat) inspection

For years, the Food Control Services have exercised control to safeguard the consumer's health by random sampling the meat at the retail stage.

With the purpose of more preventive protection and in order to satisfy the veterinary requirements of importing countries, preventive inspections at slaughterhouses and cutting establishments have been started.

These plants must meet various sanitary requirements, e.g.:

- separate rooms for reception, slaughtering and evisceration;
- separate cooling and despatch rooms;
- obligatory cooling during storage and transport;
- daily cleansing and disinfection of rooms, equipment and packaging material;
- requirements with respect to clothes and facilities for handwashing.

Firms that voluntarily submit to this inspection are obliged to permit inspection of the whole production process. On arrival as well as during evisceration, each animal must be submitted to individual inspection.

When approved, the carcass is equipped with a mark of official sanitary control. Inspectors and veterinary officials of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries also carry out tests for the presence of residues.

This preventive inspection provides an indirect stimulus to rabbitmeat production, because the mark of official sanitary control tells the consumer that he is offered a good-quality product from healthy animals.

(A slide show illustrated production, slaughtering and inspection).

5. References

- 1) Consulentenschap in Algemene Dienst voor Pluimveehouderij: Handboek voor de pluimveehouderij 305, 306 (1983).
- 2) Terbijhe, R.J.: Keuring van kerstkonijnen, Tijdschrift Diergeneeskunde, 101, 1185-1188 (1976).

6. Summary

Poultrymeat production in the Netherlands is also stimulated by introducing a preventive inspection during slaughter, which offers the consumer guarantees that rabbitmeat originates from healthy animals and that the risks of contamination during processing and distribution are minimized.

Samenvatting

De produktie van konijnenvlees in Nederland wordt o.a. gestimuleerd door het instellen van een preventieve keuring tijdens het slachten, zodat de consument garanties verkrijgt, dat het vlees slechts afkomstig is van gezonde dieren en dat besmetting risico's tijdens het verwerken en de distributie geminimaliseerd worden.

