A SURVEY ON THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF SMALL-SCALE RABBIT FARMS IN HUNGARY

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Abstract - Hungary's rabbit meat output is produced in small-scale enterprises almost completely. Therefore it is obviously important to survey the working conditions and level of management on these farms from time to time.
For this reason, a questionnaire was published in the Hungarian Small Producers' Journal. 550 questionnaires proper for evaluation were returned to the authors.
As a whole it can be stated that the housing conditions have improved during the recent 5 years as far as both the buildings and the cages are concerned.
Unfortunately, no improvement can be detected in the aspects of breeding. This is especially true for the breed composition of the stock. The proportion of genetically poorer breeds has become a lot greater, whereas the number of growing rabbits sold from one doe has decreased.
Many new producers are unemployed and start the operation with the aim of making some extra money. Most of them give up soon because of lack of knowledge and poor profitability. Even more trained producers think to reduce farm size if the economic conditions don't turn for the better very soon.

INTRODUCTION

Since 98 to 99 % of Hungary's total and exported meat rabbit production are produced in the small-scale enterprises, it is obviously important to make a survey on their working conditions and level of management from time to time. In this survey we intend to depict the present situation and compare it to that of 10 and 5 years ago.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

To obtain data on small-scale enterprises, a questionnaire, only slightly modified as compared to the one used in 1989 was published in the issue No. 1994/2 of the Hungarian Small Producers' Journal. Proper for evaluation, 550 questionnaires have been returned to the author (the numbers were 570 and 585 in 1984 and 1989, resp.).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. What we have found out about the producers

Out of the people included in the survey 28 % are retired or disabled pensioners, while 36.4 % are manual workers, 12.7 % brain or office workers, 7 % students and 16.4 % unemployed. The number of retired persons has increased since the previous survey by 6 %. The category of unemployed people is a new phenomenon in this survey. The average age of the producer is 41 years which is actually the same as 5 years ago. 41 % of them have started their rabbit enterprise within the recent 5 years. The relevant figures are 16 % for those who started 6 to 10 years ago, and 21 % and 22 % for those who started 10 to 20 or more than 20 years ago, respectively. These percentages are very similar to our previous findings and emphasize the fact that many people get involved with rabbit production for few years only, and they soon give up this activity because of lack of knowledge and low profitability. Having a look at the composition of rabbit producers we'll find that there are more and more people among producers that live in poor living conditions as a consequence of the social and economic changes. These people try to make some extra money by keeping rabbits, although in many cases with little success. Concerning place of living and level of education the producers included in the survey represent the composition of the whole population of the country.

2. Keeping technology and housing conditions

Table 1 is to show the answers with regard to housing conditions. The data indicate continuous improvement since 1984. Only 8 % of the producers keep their animals in cages set up open-air, while the proportion of those

Table 1 : Housing conditions at private farms

Year	1984 %	1989 %	1994 %
In cages at open air	15	12	8
In sheds	16	21	18
Closed wooden stall	14	17	16
Bricked building	33	41	44
Difference types of keeping	12	9	14

Table 2 : Cage types used at private farms

Year	1984 %	1989 %	1994 %
Wooden cages with board floor	31.2	24.6	21
Wooden cages with slatted floor	17.5	11.7	10
Wooden cages with wire floor	5.6	9.2	11
Metal cages made at home	14.2	20.8	20
Metal cages (industrial)	6.1	25.4	33.2
Two or more cage types are used	25.4	8.2	4.8

Table 3 : Farm size on the basis of breeding does

Year	1984	1989	1994
Stock size	%	%	%
1-5 does	15.1	14.6	16.5
6-10 does	51.1	33.4	31.4
11-15 does	20.8	21.3	18.2
16-20 does	7	12.7	14.8
20 does	6	18	17.2

who manage different types of keeping has increased. 43 % of the buildings are stated as new and 53 % old by the producers.

Regarding cage types (Table 2), a stepforward has occurred as well. The proportion of cages with board floor has decreased again, while that of industrial metal cages has increased. Home-made cages have a share of 65 %, while 6.4 % and 10.5 % have been purchased at a dealer in the framework of some bargain sale and 18.1 % from other small producers. This latter number also supports our previous statement that a great number of producers keep rabbits only for a short period of time.

3. Aspects of the breeding work

On the averages, the breeding stock consists of 15.8 does and 3.1 bucks on the farms surveyed. As it is shown in Table 3, no remarkable change has occurred as to farm size. It is welcome change, however, that a new category of producers keeping 50 to 100 does has appeared within the group of producers keeping more than 20 does. The significance of this category will hopefully increase in the future.

Looking at the breed composition of the stock it can be seen in Table 4 that proportion of the New Zealand White and Californian breeds has decreased considerably which has probably been the consequence of the abolition of the premium (extra money) previously paid for white-coloured rabbits. Instead of these, colour breeds and crossbred populations have gained ground. These changes of the breed composition have been influenced by the cessation of the placing-out of breeding animals from breeding centres to the small-scale producers at a reduced price, too.

The number of litters per year per doe proved to 5.0 on the farms surveyed. So, although this trait would be extremely important in improving the profitability of production, no favourable change could be detected in this respect (the relevant data were 4.6 in 1984 and 5.3 in 1989). The number of litters per year would be possible to improve by shortening the period between delivery (birth of a new litter) and the forthcoming mating. This is a true possibility because mating is done more than 40 days after delivery on 21.2 % of the farms, 31 to 40 days after delivery on 12.5 %, 21 to 30 days after delivery on 38 % of the farms, while 11 to 20 days after delivery on 22.1 % and 1 to 10 days after delivery on 7.9 % of the farms. Weaning is mostly carried out at the age of 6 weeks. In 72 % of the cases it is the growing rabbits that are transferred into the new cage or, in 35 % of the cases, placed on the ground.

Table 4 : Compound of breeding stock by breeds

Breeds	% of does			% of bucks		
	1984	1989	1994	1984	1989	1994
New-Zealand white	47.0	58.0	33.0	45.0	52.0	23.9
Californian	18.0	23.0	20.7	18.0	20.3	13.0
Vienna blue	3.0	1.4	1.7	2.0	2.0	2.8
Hungarian giant	7.0	4.1	8.9	10.0	6.3	12.5
Others	25.0	13.4	35.6	25.0	18.4	47.8

4. Cross-section of the production output

The growing rabbits go either for slaughter or to another farm as breeding animals or they remain on the farm and serve as replacement or for family consumption. Almost every producer sends animals to slaughter, though the proportion of those who send only those rabbits that are above the need of the family is increasing. 41 % of the producers keep rabbits for family consumption.

The number and purpose of utilisation of the meat rabbits produced on an average farm during one year show the following distribution:

Purpose of utilisation	meat rabbits/year	%
Delivery for slaughter	400	91.0
Selling breeding animals	10	2.3
Retained for replacement	8	1.8
Retained for family consumption	20.5	4.9

The number of rabbits per doe grown up to weaning has proven to be 27.7 in 1994, while it was 30.9 years ago. The growing rabbits are now 13.7 weeks old when reaching the average body weight of 2730 g for delivery to slaughter.

5. Feeding and nutrition

Feeding conditions are important to watch because feeding costs form the biggest part of the production costs of rabbit meat. Concentrates (fortified diets) are fed to the rabbits on 96 % of the farms, whereas hays only on 84 % of the farms. Out of grains as components of grain mixtures wheat is used in 39 %, barley in 59 %, oat in 40 % and maize in 41 % for feeding purposes. The input for 1 kg rabbit meat delivered is 3.05 kg fortified diet, 1.1 kg mixed grains and 1.3 kg hay. Hay consumption has decreased since the previous survey.
Twice-a-day feeding is most usual on the rabbit farms (85 %). Looking at the types of feeders used, the proportion of metal feeders and self-feeders have increased parallel with the improvement of the quality of the cages (now 51 % and 23 %, respectively). From the 2 % 10 years ago the proportion of the farms using valve drinkers has increased up to 9 % by now. The rest of the producers use open drinking vessels.

6. General questions

The questions included in this part of the questionnaire had to be answered by giving scores from 1 to 5. Score 1 was the worst and score 5 the best value. The real score averages have been summarised in Table 5.
Quality of the premixed concentrates and the supply of animal drugs (health care) have been judged as better, whereas the prices of delivery (paid by the wholesalers or middlemen to the producers) have been judged as worse than at the time of the previous survey. The majority of producers are planning to reduce the number of does or even wind up the enterprise and keep rabbits only for family consumption at the most if the relative position between prices of concentrates and prices of rabbit meat doesn't become more favourable. However, in the case that they can get the yearly mean price for the meat (it has been put at 154 Ft/kg), 85 % of the producers would be ready to develop the enterprise further.

We can conclude the from going that the keeping conditions (both the buildings and the cages) have improved during the recent 5 years. Unfortunately, no improvement can be detected in the aspects of breeding, and what

is more, the proportion of genetically poorer breeds has increased dramatically. Also, the number of growing rabbits sold from one doe has decreased.

Table 5 : General questions, answers between 1-5 points

	1989	1994
How are you interested in meat production	3.3	3.2
How do you feel your work being estimated	2.9	2.8
How do you estimate the producing traits of your stock	3.7	3.7
Quality of pellets	2.8	3.3
Veterinary providing	2.7	3.4
Information supplying	2.6	2.8
Estimation the work of buyer-up	3.2	3.2
Opinion on buying-up prices	2.2	2.0

Leistungsparameter der kaninchen in ungarischen kleinbetriebe- Die Produktion von kaninchenfleisch in Ungarn findet sich fast volständig in Kleinbetreiben statt. So es ist selbstverständlich wie wichtig ist es, die Arbeitsbedingungen und das Niveau von Management in diesen Betrieben von Zeit zu Zeit zu untersuchen.
Desiwegen wurde in der Zeitung von Ungarischen Kleinzüchter ein Fragebogen veröffenlicht. 550 zur Auswertung geeignete Fragebogen wurde dem Autor zurückgeschickt.
Im Ganzen man kann feststellen, daß die Haltunsgbedingungen, sowohl die Gebäude als auch die Kaninchenkasten während der letzten 5 Jahren geprüft wurden.
Leider in Hinsicht der Fütterung könnte man keine Untersuchung vornehmen. Das gilt besonders für die Zusammensetzung des Futters vom Bestand. Der Anteil von genetisch armerem Futter wuchs, so die Zahl der von einer Häsin verkauften kaninchen sak. Einige von neuen Produzenten sind arbeitslos und fangen mit der Production an, um extra ein wenig Geld verdienen zu können. Meisten von denen hören damit wegen des Fehleus von FAchwissen und des geringen Gewinnes schnell auf.
Auch einige erfahrene Producent denkt auch über die Reduktion von Betrebsgröße nach, wenn die wirtschaftliche Lage in der nahe Zukunft nicht besser wird.