

## COLONY REARING OF FATTENING RABBITS

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### ABSTRACT

After weaning, rabbits are nearly exclusively housed in small collective cages till slaughter age. Group size ranges from 2 to over 50 fatteners and the space per animal in commercial units between 500 and 700 cm<sup>2</sup>. The different housing systems are discussed in this paper and special attention is focussed if the barren environment and restricted natural locomotion pattern causes behavioural problems. Stereotypies or injuries due to the wire bottom are seldom observed in fatteners. Nevertheless, one of main behavioural needs of rabbits seems to be the possibility of gnawing. Based on experimental results, there seems to be an antagonism between increased group size and or size of the area assigned to growing animals, and their growth performance and sanitary risks. Moreover, in large groups aggressiveness is a problem especially near puberty age. More research is necessary to determine the minimal space required per rabbit to obtain a sufficient level of welfare and optimal production results. Finally the attention is drawn to the fact that alternative pen housing does not fit with actual management systems used in intensive breeding units.

**Key words:** fatteners, housing, performances, welfare.