

Brief on Rabbit Farming in the UK – January 2017

Introduction

There has been little official information available on rabbit production in the UK since the Meat Hygiene Service ceased to function, i.e. 2009/2010. However, figures from before then show that in 2009, the UK produced 2-3000 tonnes of rabbit meat and imported 5000 tonnes (mostly from China, Hungary and Poland). It is therefore very difficult to get any accurate, up to date figures on the number of rabbits farmed for meat in the UK and it appears that anyone farming rabbits, is unlikely to want to publicise the fact beyond their trusted supply chain.

The rabbit farming industry in the UK is fairly small-scale and greater numbers are reared in other European countries, i.e. in 2011, around 326 million rabbits were slaughtered in the EU as a whole.

Preamble

- According to a study carried out by the Scottish Rural College, in the UK, 4 million farmed rabbits and game birds were slaughtered in 2009 but the figures were not collated separately.
- Between 50-60% of the world's rabbit meat supply was produced on commercial rabbit farms.
- The breeds of rabbits most commonly used for meat production are New Zealand Whites, the California, Commercial White and some hybrids.

Rabbit farming

Historically, commercial rabbit farms varied in size from small farms with 200 breeding does, to large farms holding up to 12,000. Most farms usually bred, fattened their rabbits and sent

them to specialist packing centres, where they were killed and sold.

Today, rabbit is rarely farmed in the UK due to limited demand for human consumption, but it continues to be intensively farmed in many parts of mainland Europe, where demand for the meat remains high. This demand is met by intensive units in France, Spain, Belgium, and Italy, among others. Unlike pigs, calves and chickens, there are no EU standards for the protection of rabbits, many of whom are kept in battery cages, which limits their freedom to roam. Rabbit meat brought into the UK from these countries more than doubled in 2013 when compared to previous years but quantified data has not been published.

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Current status

As of 2017, there are no 'approved' rabbit breeding farms or slaughter facilities for human consumption registered with the Food Standards Agency and only one approved facility for pet food use. It seems that in the UK rabbit farming is very much a 'cottage industry'.

References

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