

END THE CAGE AGE FOR RABBITS



The life of rabbits in natural conditions

Rabbits are very active, athletic and inquisitive by nature. In natural conditions, they run, jump, forage and graze for food and dig complex burrows as part of their normal activities.

Being vulnerable to predators, rabbits are very sensitive, with excellent eyesight, hearing and sense of smell. These senses help them avoid predation and ensure they know where hiding places are located. They are social animals and like to huddle together and groom each other, but they also choose to spend time alone.



Rabbits able to run, hop, sit with their ears up, and knowing where they can run to hide



Caged EU rabbits: nowhere to hide, no chance to hop or even walk

The life of farmed rabbits in the EU

Farmed rabbits keep the same behaviours, needs and instincts as their free-living cousins. Yet the 112 million rabbits farmed commercially in the EU are almost all confined for their entire lives to cramped, barren metal cages that severely limit their movement and natural behaviours. Some are kept in so-called 'enriched' cages, but these do little if anything to improve their welfare. Rabbit cages are often housed in dark, filthy sheds.

A female rabbit used for breeding will be caged on her own until she is slaughtered at around 10 months old. A breeding male may be kept in a cage for up to 6 years.

Their offspring, the rabbits farmed for meat, are reared in very large numbers and slaughtered at 8-12 weeks of age. They have a smaller living area than an A4 sheet of paper. The cages are too low for them to stand upright and too cramped for them to lie down stretched out, let alone take a single hop. The wire flooring commonly causes painful sores and no bedding is provided.

Such conditions cause suffering on a colossal scale, resulting in high levels of stress, disease and death. To mitigate this, antibiotics are widely used, thus aggravating the problem of antibiotic resistance in humans.

In addition to commercial farming, Commission figures indicate that some 60 million rabbits are kept in backyard systems. How they are housed is not recorded but it is thought most are caged.

More humane systems are economically viable and are in use

In Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands have banned barren cages for fattening rabbits and breeding does. In Belgium pen systems are the minimum standard. These give rabbits more space than cages, allowing them to stretch and jump. They also offer some enrichment and places to hide.

Organic systems use group pens with more space, natural daylight and a small area of pasture for grazing at the base of the pen. France has small-scale organic rabbit production but in these rabbits are kept free-range in a large outdoor enclosure or in outdoor mobile runs.



Park system providing more space than cages and enrichment



French organic system with grazing, more space and natural light

EU legislation to End the Cage Age for rabbits

The EU has no species-specific legislation to protect the welfare of farmed rabbits. In 2017 the European Parliament called for such legislation to be introduced. Compassion in World Farming calls for an end to the use of cages in rabbit farming by 2027.

This could be achieved through specific legislation for rabbits or included in a revision of Directive 98/58/EC on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes. The Directive stipulates that “the freedom of movement of an animal ... must not be restricted to cause unnecessary suffering”. It also states that “where an animal is continuously or regularly confined, it must be given the space appropriate to its physiological and ethological needs in accordance with established experience and scientific knowledge.”

Confining rabbits in cages does not fulfil these requirements.

Additionally, Article 13 TFEU requires “the Union and member states, since animals are sentient beings, to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals.”

To do so, the Commission must take the initiative to bring in and enforce an EU-wide ban on the use of cages in rabbit farming, including in backyard rabbit production. It should instead support higher-welfare, well-managed systems that do not use cages.

The vast majority of EU citizens demand reform for farmed animals; the 2016 Eurobarometer poll on animal welfare shows that 94% think protecting the welfare of farm animals is important. Since then the recent [End the Cage Age European Citizens' Initiative](#) has gathered well over the required one million validated signatures from across the EU.

It is time to End the Cage Age.

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