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RABBIT TRACKS: *Winter Rabbit Care*

Introduction

Every animal must adjust to changes in its environment. It pants or sweats if the temperature is too high, and shivers if it's too cold. The animal's heart-beat increases and it breathes faster when it runs or is under stress.

If the change in the environment or the amount of stress isn't too severe, an animal can usually adapt quite well. However, if the changes or stresses are too great, it won't be able to adjust. Animals that are healthy can endure short-time or minor stresses, but long-term or severe stresses will eventually cause them to break down.

Winter can be very hard on wild and domestic rabbits. If you don't "winterize" your rabbits and their hutches well enough, they won't breed, gain weight or show well. Your rabbits can be stressed by low temperatures, poor ventilation, drafts and poor nutrition (including a lack of drinking water). You can prepare the rabbits in your 4-H rabbit project for winter using the tips in this sheet.

The Comfort Zone

The rabbit's normal body temperature is 102°F to 103°F. Their "comfort zone" (the outside temperatures at which rabbits process feed most efficiently and gain weight the easiest) is 60°F to 65°F. Temperatures of 20°F to 60°F aren't usually too much of a problem for rabbits, but you must protect them from direct contact with cold winds, snow and rain.

Face your hutches to the south or east to protect your rabbits from Michigan's prevailing northwesterly winds and storms. Setting the rabbitry next to a building, solid fence or woodlot, or covering the hutches with lightweight plastic sheeting will also provide a barrier against winter weather.



Ventilation

Proper ventilation is just as important to rabbits in cold winter weather as it is during the summer months. The measures you take to try to stop heat loss may also cut off air flow in the hutches. This can make the pens damp or even wet, and can let foul odors and ammonia fumes build up.

The air flow needs of your rabbitry will vary from day to day, so keep an eye on conditions and adjust the air flow to match them. No matter what type of ventilation system you use, make sure there is gentle air movement around each animal, and no drafts, pockets of stale air or sudden temperature changes.


Does and newly kindled kits, or does that are about to kindle, need extra attention in winter. Save clean, dry fur from old nests to help cover bunnies whose does haven't pulled enough fur to cover them. When it is very cold, the rabbits' breathing may cause water droplets to condense on the nest box fur. If the nest material becomes wet, replace it.

Feed and Water

Michigan's cold winter temperatures increase the energy needs of rabbits. This means you will need to provide plenty of proper feed and water for your rabbits to help them replace the body heat they lose. When the temperature is at or below freezing, water your rabbits two or three times a day. If you water your rabbits in large pans, they may only have time to drink a little bit before the water freezes. If you use small bowls, you may have to fill the bowls more often because the rabbits will drink all the water as soon as you set the bowl in the cage. You might want to compromise and use two sets of watering dishes so that when one set is in the cage, you can thaw out and clean the other set.



Be a Careful Rabbit Raiser

Successful rabbit raisers strive to maintain the best conditions possible for their rabbits. Good managers try to eliminate as many sources of stress to their rabbits as they can. This means they constantly watch for signs of stress, such as the smell of stale or tainted air, too much moisture, or a rabbit that sneezes or coughs too often. It takes a special person to brave the harsh winter weather as he or she cares for his or her rabbits, but that's what it takes for a successful 4-H rabbit project. Remember, that extra effort may mean an extra bunny in every litter or a blue ribbon at a show. 

This bulletin was written by the members of the 1985-87 State 4-H Rabbit Developmental Committee. It was designed and illustrated by Cynthia Alderson, 4-H Graphic Artist. The bulletin was edited by Rebecca McKee, 4-H Publications Editor.



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