

Raising Rabbits for Meat: Marketing

Living on
The Land

Legality

Regulations for selling rabbit meat vary from state to state. In general, rabbit meat sales are under less scrutiny than meat from other animals because of the small market size. There are some food licensing exemptions in Oregon, but these depend on the intended purchasers and consumers. Check with federal, state, and county departments of agriculture and health to learn what regulations are involved before starting to sell your rabbit meat.

Classes of meat

Meat rabbits are classed based on their age and weight. According to the American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA), classes include fryer, roaster, and stewer. Fryers are most desirable because of their tender meat and more desirable color. The table below provides carcass class details.

Processing

If you raise rabbits for personal consumption, you can process them yourself. After processing, wrap and refrigerate carcasses for 24 hours so the fat hardens and it is easier to cut the meat.

If you plan on selling the meat, you must use a licensed processing plant. Since there is such a small market for rabbit meat, there are not many designated rabbit processing plants. In Oregon, rabbits are not covered by the Oregon Department of Agriculture's (ODA) farm-direct poultry license exemption, so rabbits must be slaughtered at an ODA-licensed facility that can process poultry or rabbits.

Inspections and grading

Rabbits are not classed with other livestock in the United States and therefore do not require inspection under the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) or the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). However, voluntary inspections can help marketing efforts. During this inspection, rabbit carcasses and organs are examined for any signs of diseases. If carcasses pass inspection, they receive the "Inspected for Wholesomeness by USDA" mark. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspections may also take place at certified processing plants. States may have stricter laws, so it is always best to check with local agencies as well.

As with inspections, grading for rabbit carcasses is voluntary. Carcasses must have passed the USDA FSIS inspection before being graded. They will be graded by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. The grading system is based on poultry grading and has U.S. Grade A, B, and C, with A being the highest quality.

Selling rabbit meat

There are two main options for selling rabbits: live or as processed carcasses or cuts. Some individuals buy quality meat rabbits for 4-H, FFA, or private use. In 4-H and FFA, youth members have rabbits for their project animals or sell them at a county fair livestock auction (Figure 1, page 2). Generally, three rabbits are required to constitute a meat pen. The three rabbits are judged on their meat quality and uniformity in weight, age, breed, and markings.

Class	Animal age	Minimum weight	Maximum weight	Meat color	Meat texture
Fryer	< 10 weeks	3.5 lb	5.5 lb	Bright pearly pink	Tender with fine grain
Roaster	< 6 months	5.5 lb	9 lb	Darker pink	Firm with coarse grain
Stewer	> 6 months	8 lb	None	Dark pink with cream-colored fat	Firm with coarse grain



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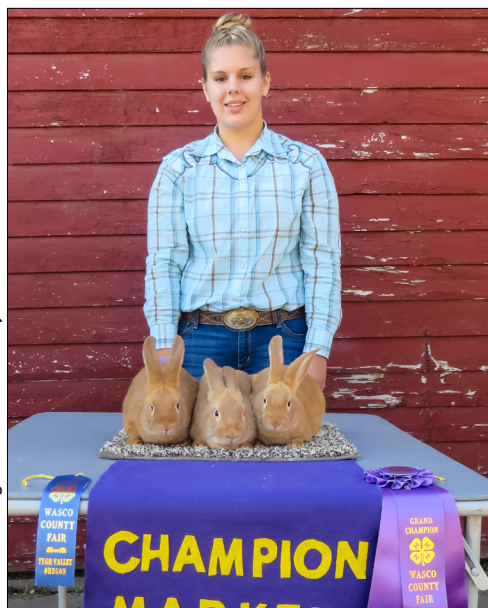


Figure 1. A 4-H member with her champion pen of fryers

Many are sold at auctions as fryers, although some programs have divisions for roasters and stewers. Most events are during the summer. Contact your local Extension office to learn more about selling to or buying from 4-H or FFA members.

The second option is to sell processed meat. The entire carcass or cut portions can be sold (Figure 2). Depending on the meat rabbit operation's licenses or exemptions, meat can be sold commercially or to individuals. Some venues include farmers markets, food swaps, or direct on-farm sales; additional regulations may apply to on-farm storage and sales. Temperatures at which meat is stored is regulated tightly and must be monitored closely on the farm, during transport to an off-farm sales site, and at off-farm sales locations. Regulations cover both fresh and frozen meat; multiple federal, state, and/or local licenses and permits may be required.

There may be a small market for rabbit pelts in some areas. Rabbit fur is dense and soft and can be used for crafts and fashion. White rabbit breeds such as New Zealands and Californians are particularly popular for pelt sales because



Figure 2. Leg and loin cuts from a rabbit

they can be dyed for a greater range of color. However, the pelts usually need to come from rabbits in prime condition, which does not occur until they have grown their adult coat. This happens at 6 to 7 months, at which time they lose their maximum carcass quality and are considered stewers.

Learn more

- Meat Licensing (Oregon Department of Agriculture)
<http://www.oregon.gov/ODA/programs/FoodSafety/FSLicensing/Pages/Meat.aspx>
- *Selling Rabbit Meat* (Washington State Department of Agriculture)
<https://agr.wa.gov/Marketing/SmallFarm/Greenbook/docs/36.pdf>
- *Rabbit Resource Handbook: For Breeding, Market, and Pet Rabbit Projects*. The Ohio State University Extension 4-H Project Guide.
<http://estore.osu-extension.org/Rabbit-Resource-Handbook-for-Breeding-Market-and-Pet-Rabbit-Projects-P208.aspx>

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