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The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead,
Hertfordshire AL4 8AN, UK
www.ufaw.org.uk

Animal Welfare 2021, 30: 493-506
ISSN 0962-7286
doi: 10.7120/09627286.30.4.012

Use of space, active and resting behaviour in fattening rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) housed in a combi park system: A case study

*S Kimm, SL Rauterberg, J Bill, J Stracke, N Kemper and M Fels**

Institute for Animal Hygiene, Animal Welfare and Farm Animal Behaviour, University of Veterinary Medicine Hannover, Foundation,
Bischofsholer Damm 15 (Building 116), D-30173 Hannover, Germany

* Contact for correspondence: Michaela.Fels@tiho-hannover.de

Abstract

*In this case study, a housing system for rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) was developed, complying with the new German Welfare Regulation, and evaluated on-farm with regard to the rabbits' behaviour during four fattening periods. The housing system was characterised by the large group size of fatteners (maximum 65 animals per group, 12 animals per m²) due to the merging of six former single units for does and their litters, post-weaning. A large elevated platform, a box with a roof (small elevated platform), a tube and gnawing materials were made available per unit. The aim being to assess the suitability of the housing system for rabbits with regard to animal welfare, based on behavioural analyses. Therefore, the use of space by the rabbits (n = 247) was investigated by video analysis (instantaneous scan sampling) during daytime. Additionally, the individual behaviour of 20 focal rabbits in different locations was assessed by continuous sampling. Results showed that rabbits preferred to huddle together in the outer units in the first weeks post-weaning. The highest animal densities were found under and in front of the large and on the small platforms. The large platforms were visited increasingly from the 10th fattening day onwards. Elevated platforms supported resting and comfort behaviours. Non-elevated open-top areas enabled upright positions and locomotor behaviours. Aggression and stereotypic behaviours rarely occurred. We conclude that the housing system supported species-specific behaviour and seemed to cater for the needs of rabbits in terms of welfare. Nevertheless, further investigation is needed to ascertain the effects on animal health and performance.*

Keywords: *animal welfare, continuous sampling, German welfare regulation, growing rabbits, instantaneous scan sampling, new housing system*