

Information Sheet 1 – Rabbit Meat Production – EU and UK

PRODUCTION & TRADE

Official data on rabbit meat production are available for only a few countries. FAOSTAT¹ estimates that 83.9 million rabbits (including hares) were slaughtered in the EU in 2021, producing around 118,800 tonnes of rabbit (and hare) meat (Table 1). EU rabbit and hare meat production was valued at US\$ 240 million in 2021¹. Production is concentrated in three countries: Spain, France and Italy, which account for more than 80% of estimated EU production (Table 1).

Major rabbit meat companies in the EU include Loel & Piriot in France², Berti Piero in Italy³ and Vall Companys in Spain⁴.

Table 1. Rabbit and hare meat production in the EU. Data are for the latest available year (share of EU total is calculated as a proportion of EU production/slaughterings in the corresponding year). Source: FAOSTAT¹.

Country (year of latest available data)	Rabbit and hare meat production (tonnes)	Share of EU rabbit and hare meat production (%)	Rabbits and hares slaughtered (thousand head)	Share of EU rabbits slaughtered (%)
European Union 27 (2021)	118,836	100.0%	83,877	100.0%
Spain (2020)	51,181	42.1%	40,723	41.7%
France (2021)	25,707	21.6%	17,305	20.6%
Italy (2019 tonnes, 2020 head)	26,647	19.4%	16,501	16.9%

Rabbit and hare meat gross exports from EU countries totalled 24,700 tonnes, with a value of US\$ 113.9 million, in 2021¹. In terms of rabbit and hare meat gross exports from EU countries in 2021, the largest exporter is Spain, followed by Hungary, France and Belgium (Figure 2). Spain exported 9,300 tonnes with a value of US\$ 32.3 million, Hungary exported 4,600 tonnes with a value of US\$ 29.9 million, France exported 3,800 tonnes with a value of US\$ 18.4 million, and Belgium exported 2,800 tonnes with a value of US\$ 15.1 million¹.

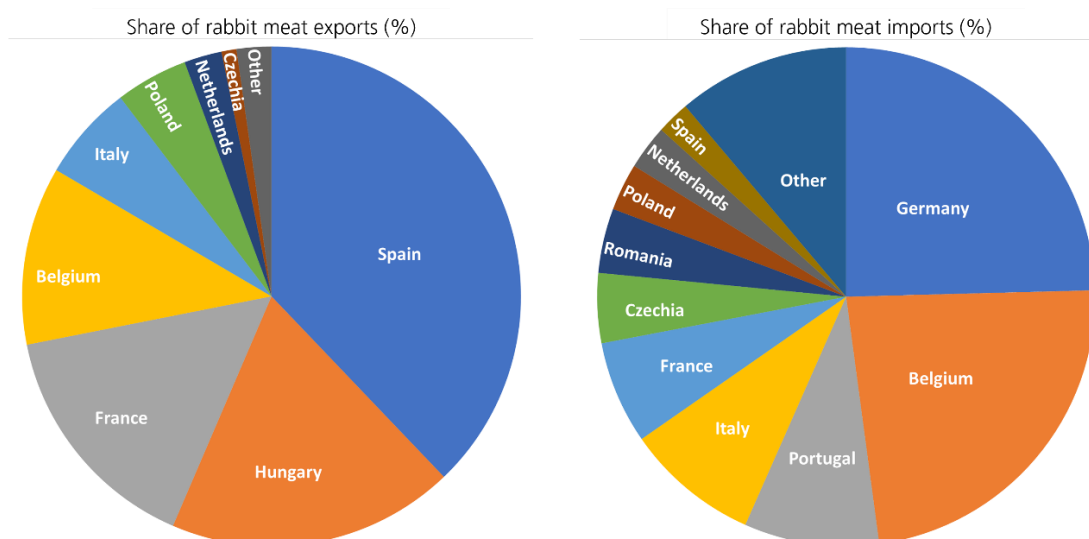


Figure 1. The main EU exporters and importers of rabbit meat by share of the market (% of tonnage) in 2021. Source: FAOSTAT¹

For rabbit and hare meat gross imports in 2021, the largest importers are Germany and Belgium (Figure 2). Germany imported 4,800 tonnes with a value of US\$ 30.9 million, and Belgium imported 4,600 tonnes with a value of US\$ 14.2 million (FAOSTAT). The UK imported a small amount of rabbit and hare meat in 2021. Gross imports to the UK were 131 tonnes, with a value of US\$ 895,000¹.



RABBIT PRODUCTION IN DIFFERENT SYSTEMS

The vast majority of growing rabbits and virtually all commercial breeding does are housed in cages or hutches. Does are almost always singly housed in cages. Conventional cages, often constructed of wire mesh, provide between 450-600 cm² per growing rabbit and have a height of less than 40 cm. A smaller percentage of production uses enriched cages which provide more space per growing rabbit (~ 600 cm²) and more vertical space (60-80 cm) as well as a platform and often a plastic footrest. Higher-welfare systems for growing rabbits include “park” systems (small indoor elevated pens often with plastic slatted floors for up to 32 growing rabbits), indoor pen systems (larger slatted or solid floored pens for housing bigger groups of growing rabbits). Some higher welfare indoor systems also include access to a wintergarden – a covered area with an outdoor climate and natural light. Systems with outdoor access can vary from providing access to an outdoor run to pasture-based systems where the rabbits can graze. In some cases, outdoor systems are based on mobile housing that can be moved to different areas of the pasture, while in others, the housing is fixed. Some aspects of organic housing systems are defined within the EU (see table below). The latest available data from the EU is from 2017 where 94% of rabbits are produced in caged systems (85% in conventional cages, 9% in enriched cages)⁵.

LEGISLATION

There is currently no specific legislation covering the welfare of farmed rabbits in the EU. However, following the successful European Citizen’s Initiative, End the Cage Age, signed by 1.4 million people, in June 2021, the European Commission gave a clear commitment to introduce a legislative proposal to ban the use of cages for farmed animals, including rabbits. Although proposals have yet to be published, the European Commission has been undertaking a comprehensive evaluation of the animal welfare legislation. For rabbits, any new legislation will set out the minimum standards to protect the welfare of farmed rabbits. Some forward-thinking EU Member States have already enacted their own legislation setting minimum standards for rabbit production including the banning of cages (Table 2).

Table 2. Overview national legislation setting out the minimum standards for the protection of farmed rabbits in Europe

	Minimum standards for the protection of rabbits in the UK are laid down in The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 (as amended, and related Regulations in other parts of the UK), which require sufficient space for all rabbits to lie on their sides at the same time and sufficient height for rabbits to sit upright on all four feet without their ears touching the top of the cage or hutch.
	There is currently no species-specific EU legislation covering the welfare of rabbits on farm but they are included in general EU animal welfare legislation, including Council Directive 98/58/EC (as amended). Some Member States have prohibited barren cages or all cages for fattening rabbits and does but these countries are not major producers of rabbit meat. New EU rules on production and labelling of organic products include regulations on rabbit nutrition, housing and husbandry for both breeding and fattening rabbits (Regulation (EU) 2018/848). These

regulations stipulate that rabbits must be group housed on solid flooring with bedding and litter material. They must be provided with outdoor access with at least vegetation but ideally pasture. Shelters, hiding spaces, platforms, and nesting material for does must be provided.



Austria banned the keeping of rabbits for meat production in cages in 2012. Minimum standards for rabbits in Austria are laid down in the 1st Animal Husbandry Ordinance⁶, which prohibits wire mesh flooring and multiple housing systems stacked on top of one another. Rabbits must be kept in pens or outdoor enclosures, always have access to gnawing material (e.g. wood) and straw or hay in a rack, natural light (if no permanent access to outside then windows must permit natural light over at least 3% of floor area) and minimum 20 lux for 8 hours/day. Space allowances depend on rabbit weight and group size: the minimum space allowance for growing rabbits is 800 cm² per rabbit, while adult breeding rabbits are provided with at least 6000cm².



Belgium first introduced legislation to protect the welfare of farmed rabbits in 2014 (Moniteur Belge [C – 2014/24303])⁷. From 2016, cages for meat rabbits have been banned in favour of park systems. While individual cages for does were meant to be phased out by 2021 in favour of group housing in enriched park systems, this deadline has been shifted to 2025 (Moniteur Belge [C – 2021/30207])⁸. Belgian park systems for growing rabbits must provide a space allowance of 800 cm² per rabbit, and must be at least 1.80 m in length and have no height restriction. Park systems must include platforms, flooring must be at least 80% plastic, and enrichment must be provided (gnawing blocks and hiding tubes).



Legislation in Germany, in force since 2014, specifies the minimum requirements for the keeping of rabbits⁹. Conventional cages are banned and all facilities have to comply by 2025. Growing rabbits must have a space allowance of at least 700 cm² per rabbit, and a total available area of at least 8,000 cm² (min 80 x 60 cm), with a minimum height of 60 cm over at least 70% of the floor area. Flooring for growing rabbits must have a maximum slot width of 11 mm, and the slat width must at least equal that of the slots. Adult breeding rabbits must have an area of at least 6000cm², with a minimum height of 80 cm over at least 70% of the floor area, including a platform. Does must have additional nestboxes of at least 1000 cm². Flooring for breeding rabbits must have a maximum slot width of 14 mm, and the slat width must at least equal that of the slots. For all rabbits, platforms must be provided, and rabbits must have access to coarse-textured roughage such as straw or hay and to suitable gnawing material at all times.



Although there is no national legislation, in 2021, the Italian Ministry of health published guidelines for rabbit breeding¹⁰. Under these guidelines, rabbits, with some exceptions, should not be kept in conventional barren cages. Any wire mesh flooring must also have a footrest/mat made of plastic or similar material. The lighting regime must include at least 8 hours of continuous darkness and 8 hours of continuous light with a gradual transition (30 mins – 2 hours) between lighting periods, while natural light is recommended for new buildings. Platforms, hiding places, and gnawing material should be provided.



Conventional barren cages are banned in the Netherlands since 2016¹¹. All farmed rabbits in the Netherlands are now housed in either enriched cages or parks with higher space allowances, more comfortable flooring and structural enrichment¹². The minimum space allowance for growing rabbits is 600 cm² per rabbit (group size ≥ 5 rabbits) or 700 cm² (group size < 5 rabbits) and a height of at least 40 cm. Breeding rabbits must have at least 4000 cm² with a height of 60 cm. All rabbits must have access to roughage or gnawing material at all times.



Minimum standards for farmed rabbits in Switzerland are specified in TSchV 455.1 since April 2008¹³. Growing rabbits must be provided with at least 800 cm² (groups over 40 animals; 1000 cm² groups under 40 animals) and a minimum enclosure height of 40 cm (under 2.3kg) or 50 cm (over 2.3 kg). Requirements on total available space for growing rabbits also depend on

rabbit weight: rabbits under 2.3kg – 3400 cm² (without platforms) 2800 cm² (with platforms, of which 2000 cm² is floor area), rabbits over 2.3kg – 4800 cm² (without platforms) 4000 cm² (with platforms, of which 2800 cm² is floor area). For adult breeding rabbits, total available area ranges from 3400-9300 cm² (enclosure without platforms)/ 2800-7800 cm² (enclosure with platforms) with an enclosure height of 40-60 cm depending on animal weight. Breeding does should have access to an additional nestbox area of 800-1200 cm². All rabbits must be provided with coarse-textured food such as hay or straw every day and must always have objects to chew on, and enclosures must be equipped with a darkened area into which the animals can retreat. Rabbits must be provided with bedding (exception for rooms with air conditioning).

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