

Rabbit Facilities on the Fly

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PRMA Journal 8(5):1-7

In 1990, I was presented the opportunity to be out of the rabbit industry and take up another vocation. After about a month of being rabbit free, I realized that rabbits were an essential part of my being. So I set out to try put myself back into rabbits. The previous herd, which continues to operate as Western Oregon Rabbit Company, took me three years to build to 300 does, including building the barns and cages to house them. I was not looking forward to all the work required to get me back into that kind of operation, so I found a way to get back into a large scale operation virtually overnight. The key to my success was finding an abandoned mink ranch that with a little work could be quickly converted to raising rabbits.

The ranch had been out of production for a little over a year as the owner retired from the mink industry. The main buildings (Figure 1) were set up to house 100 breeding mink per barn in 30" deep by 24" wide cages (Figure 2). These cages were smaller than I was use to raising does with litters in, but still seemed to be sufficient for my needs.



Figure 1. The main breeding barns as I found them when I moved in.



Figure 2. Typical mink cages made of 14 gauge 1" X 2" galvanized wire on all sides including the floor.

The cages were made from 1" X 2" 14 gauge galvanized wire that had been re galvanized and from their appearance, would last another 20 years. The cages were previously taken as a bank of 4 to be chemically cleaned and then dropped into a tank to be galvanized. The door latches and side wires looked as if they were welded together from the thick layers of compound on the cages. This actually proved to be a problem when I started removing the cage floors to replace the wire with 1" X ½", 16 gauge floor wire.

After finding this ranch, I came into 500 junior breeding animals that needed a home real fast. The next step was to clean the buildings using a power washer and removing the mink nest boxes. The holes in the boxes were too small for rabbits although they did have an interior size comparable to the nest boxes we use for our New Zealand White does. Once the cages were cleaned and J feeders installed, I had rabbit ready cages, almost. Needing to house rabbits right away, we put them on the 1" X 2" floors. This worked in the short term, but a more permanent solution was needed. Replacing the floor wire with 16 gauge 1" X ½" seemed the best solution, although it would be expensive. There were 16 buildings, each with 100 holes. An alternative to replacing all the floors was to utilize the floors removed, by offsetting the wire and fastening them to the existing floors, a crude 1" X ½" floor could be made (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Notice the wires near the does nose. This represents the original floor and another floor salvage from another cage laid to make a 1" X ½" grid.

These floors worked as well as the new wire and we were able to recycle enough floors so we only had to replace half the cage floors with new wire. We were even able to cut drop nest boxes into these floors, something that did not happen immediately. Using this method, a new barn could be operational in less than a week, in four months I had 16 barns holding breeding does and fryers (Figure 4.)



Figure 4. A doe with a 4 week litter on a cage floor made by offsetting one floor on top of the other.

The water system actually worked equally well for mink and rabbits. The same type of valve is used and the system was gravity feed (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Front of a barn with the float tank feeding the automatic watering system running along the outside of the barn on the back of the cages.

One other requirement was to run electricity to the barns for lighting and to power heat cables to keep the waterlines open when it got cold. There was no power since the mink are fed a wet diet, lacking water from frozen lines was not a significant issue. When the lines did freeze, they generally thawed by late morning anyway, but since rabbits are active and do most of their eating at night, it was imperative to get heat cables in. I do believe the lights were more for me than for the rabbits since I worked past nightfall most evenings, especially during the winter months.

Power was run to each barn using 12 gauge underground feeder cable that was actually suspended in the air above the barns (Figure 6). The wires are high to ensure the passage of a tractor that was used to pull a manure wagon when cleaning.



Figure 6. Electrical cables strung from barn to barn to supply power for lights and heat cables.



Figure 7. Interior of a barn housing 100 breeding does showing the placement of lights.

The barns were open from mid cage to the ground but had a board that could be dropped to cover most of the cage in inclement weather. These barns provide the same protection as the A frames I currently use. The way the cages are installed also made it easy to clean the cages from outside the barns, we ran a tractor with a manure wagon between the barns and shoveled the manure directly into the cart (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The barns in winter with the boards lowered to cover the rabbits. Notice the ice hanging from the cages, a sign the water is still working during freezing temperatures.

While the mink cages did work and allowed the herd to grow to 1400 breeders in a little over a years time, we did eventually start to replace cages with rabbit cages. These cages were 30" deep by 36" wide and used 16 gauge 1" X ½" floor wire (figure 9). Using the mink cages allowed us to get

production up so that we could build cages using profit from the fryers. The new cages allowed us to leave litters on the does past 4 weeks, something that couldn't happen in the 24" X 30" cages for lack of room.



Figure 9. New cages 30" deep by 36" wide of all rabbit wire.

One last item that we eventually built was a feed cart (Figure 10). When I first moved into the ranch, everything was fed from 50 pound sacks and 5 gallon buckets. As we expanded, this proved too time consuming. We switched to one ton bulk sacks and a feed cart that held 300 pounds of feed. This made for easier feeding times and at the peak of production only required four refills to feed the whole compound.

While this ranch provided a quick way to get back into rabbits, it was only a short solution. I operated the ranch for a little over two years when I decided that with the level of production, it made more sense to move the operation closer to the processor. Hence, we slowly vacated the facility and moved our operation to California to be near the processor.



Figure 10. This feed cart holds 300 pounds of feed and is still used today, over 15 years since it was built.

One of the major expenses in the startup of a rabbit operation is facilities. Finding and utilizing this abandoned mink ranch proved to be very cost effective allowing us to concentrate on production while not worrying about finding funds to build cages and barns. In California we converted turkey grow-out barns to rabbit production, however cages had to be supplied. Starting in the mink ranch provided the necessary capital to be able to fund building cages to fill the turkey barn. I can't imagine starting a large scale operation without the benefit we had of the mink ranch and I am not sure that I have the patience anymore to grow slow as I so routinely tell anyone starting in the rabbit business.