

Why Raising Rabbits in Maine Might Be a Suitable Enterprise for Persons with Disabilities

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Disabilities and Farming

Having a disability or chronic illness might prevent or limit opportunities for employment. With appropriate planning, assistive tools, and safety measures, farming could be a way to generate income for a person with limitations.

In farming, you are your own boss. For many farm enterprises, you can set your own schedule and plan necessary tasks around your abilities and availability. Many tasks in farming can be performed with special tools, machinery, adaptive technologies, or can be automated. These work modifications can save time, reduce physical stresses, and allow the farmer to work more efficiently and safely. In addition, farming can be therapeutic; the experiences allow you to be outdoors, growing and caring for animals or plants, be a good steward for the land and provide food or fiber for yourself,

your family, or others. Well managed farming enterprises can also generate an income.

Disabilities may limit the type and kind of farming enterprises in which to be involved, however, some enterprises might present better opportunities and fewer physical and financial risks than others. Most farming enterprises are seasonal with productive times and off-season times. The seasonal aspect of farming can allow for resting, regrouping and planning. The seasonal aspect can also be advantageous in managing and reducing risk.

This fact sheet is designed as an informational and exploratory tool to help you determine if raising rabbits might be a good fit for you. As you read this fact sheet, make notes, or highlight the sections you see as important or that you want to learn more about.

Raising Rabbits as Livestock

While not everyone is suited for animal-based agriculture enterprises, some individuals have innate abilities in handling, working with and raising livestock. They are able to recognize stress, illness, or discomfort through “reading” animal movements and behaviors. They have a knack for listening to the proper sounds of normal animals. Some farmers even use their sense of smell to differentiate normal from abnormal conditions with their livestock. Other individuals struggle with effective animal husbandry and in managing and handling animals for optimum performance.

As with any farming enterprise, determine what product(s) or service(s) you would like to provide for sale and identify reliable markets for your products or services before making monetary investments in rabbits, equipment, and supplies.



Baby rabbits in a nesting box. Photo by Sydne Spencer.

Potential Advantages of Raising Rabbits

- Rabbits are small in size and light in weight as compared to most other species of livestock. For these reasons, rabbits are more easily caught, handled and transported.
- Most rabbit species are not aggressive towards or dangerous to people. Being scratched or bitten by a rabbit during handling is a possibility. Be mindful that bucks can be more aggressive than does.
- Rabbits are efficient converters of feed to meat or fiber. The production cycle of meat rabbits is relatively short (10-16 weeks in length from start to finish depending on the rabbit breed). This allows for relatively easy entry and exit from the enterprise.
- A small number of rabbits can be managed efficiently as a potentially profitable enterprise. Spreadsheets are available to calculate breakeven points for meat enterprises and in figuring how many rabbits are needed to satisfy a market.
- The cost of starting a small-scale rabbit enterprise is relatively small compared to other agricultural enterprises but investments in breeding stock, cages, cage stands, feeders, waterers, bedding, nest boxes, electricity, feed, feed storage bins, and housing will be necessary.
- Rabbits can be raised in a building on one level (ground level floor) or on multiple levels. A single level allows a person with mobility issues or in a wheelchair to work and observe the rabbits. They can also be raised on a small parcel of land. Raising rabbits on pasture will require more physical work and management than raising them in cages.

Rabbit Enterprise Opportunities

The production and marketing of meat or fiber are the most common rabbit enterprises for U.S. farmers. However, other rabbit-related enterprises that some individuals might consider include:

- Breeding stock – for show or sale
- Laboratory stock – for private research or biomedical laboratories
- Rabbit rental – for agritourism, entertainment, or educational purposes. Rabbit rentals could be available for special events or on a seasonal basis.
- Rabbit pelts – for clothing, apparel or other articles

Physical Tasks Raising Rabbits

Before thinking through the advantages of raising rabbits as compared to other farming enterprises, you ought to consider the physical tasks that are typically necessary in successfully keeping rabbits for show, fiber production, or for meat production. Below is a list of rabbit-related chores. Some of the chores listed apply to show rabbits, fiber rabbits, or to meat rabbit operations only. Other chores could apply to all three types of rabbit enterprises. As you review the list in the table at the end of this bulletin, think about your abilities and how you would accomplish or address the specific chore. Highlight items that you want to remember and take notes.

Adaptive Tools and Technologies

Adaptive tools and assistive technology can enable a farmer to manage their livestock and farm business. Planning ahead with site location, access and pre-design can enable a farmer, with or without a disability, to work safely and successfully.

- Many rabbit production tasks are not strenuous, enabling a person with limited strength to successfully raise, handle, and transport rabbits.
- Many tasks in relation to rabbit production can be automated. Automated systems for ventilation, fans, lighting, feeding, and watering are available even for small-scale enterprises.
- Seating options can be built-in or located near the rabbit housing and production areas for those individuals with endurance issues.
- Smaller hand tools or telescoping tools can be used if strength is an issue during cleaning and feeding.
- Wireless video cameras can be used to monitor rabbits remotely. This technology reduces the need to be ever-present. However, this technology does not eliminate the need to check on livestock.
- Production and financial records can be kept using voice recognition software. This allows someone with sight or hand use limitations to be actively involved in the record-keeping aspect of the enterprise.

Consider using Universal Design and ergonomic concepts when planning the rabbit housing and production areas. Universal design is a method of designing tools, buildings, and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible. For more information, see Principles of Universal Design.

- Access to and from all workspaces should be with ease.
- Pathways should be firm, smooth, and level with adequate drainage.
- Use contrasting colors and texture for pathways.
- For wheelchair or walker users, the pathway should be wide enough and sloped no more than 1:12.
- For the mobility impaired users, be sure to have clear pathways, no overhead obstacles, and all tools should have a suitable storage spot.
- For the visually impaired, use contrasting colors and textures and use wind chimes to provide location cues.
- University of Maine Cooperative Extension Bulletin #1044, Backyard Production of Meat Rabbits in Maine extension.umaine.edu/publications/1044e/
- American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA) arba.net
- ARBA Standard of Perfection
- ARBA Guidebook to Raising Better Rabbits and Cavies
- Eastern Maine Rabbit Producers Association emrba.org
- Western Maine Rabbit Producers Association www.facebook.com/groups/WMRBA/
- Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry maine.gov/dacf/
- Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) (help with manure management plans and other water-related issues) nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home/
- “Rabbit” Breeds arba.net/recognized-breeds/

Conclusion

Raising rabbits might fit you and your situation. Invest adequate time in the exploration process and in considering the advantages and drawbacks. Speak with others who raise rabbits for fiber, meat or show depending on your interest.

Additional Rabbit Keeping Resources

- University of Maine Cooperative Extension Bulletin #1117, Farmer Skill & Knowledge List for Rabbits extension.umaine.edu/publications/1117e/

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Task or Chore	Fiber	Meat	Show
Disinfecting pens/houses/units			
Carrying or moving feed			
Gathering and catching rabbits			
Holding rabbits			
Handling and inspecting rabbits			
Constructing cages			
Opening and closing cage doors			
Repairing cages			
Crating rabbits for transport			
Cleaning & disinfecting crates			
Monitoring and observing rabbits (up close or from a distance)			
Distributing feed to rabbits			
Distributing bedding in areas where does are to kindle			
Cleaning out and disinfecting nest boxes			
Cleaning and disinfecting feeders and watering units			
Maintaining timers and other controls (for lights, vents, doors, conveyors, etc.)			
Removing injured, sick or dead rabbits			
Composting carcasses of dead rabbits			
Culling rabbits that don't meet set standards			
Clipping toenails			
Sexing bunnies			
Cleaning windows for best natural light			
Combing wool rabbits			
Preparing for rabbit processing			
Processing rabbits for meat			
Handling processed rabbits			
Cleaning & disinfecting rabbit processing tools and equipment			
Cleaning & disinfecting rabbit processing building, room or area			
Composting offal, skins, and other body parts from processing			
Testing (swabbing) for cleanliness of processing equipment & area			
Setting up & using biosecurity protocol (footwear, clothing, disinfectant foot baths)			
Keeping and using financial records			
Interacting with customers			
Interacting with employees or helpers			
Purchasing, securing, and storing supplies			
Purchasing rabbits (direct from the supplier or through a broker by phone, email, or in person)			