

Recent developments in rabbit housing in Northern Europe



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Content

- Why an “alternative housing”?
- Situation in Belgium, The Netherlands and Germany
- Legislation in Belgium
- Park housing of fatteners
- Part-time group housing of females using polyvalent park housing

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Why ? Actions of NGO against cage housing

- **Already from 1990 off**, demand for alternative housing
 - » Switzerland
 - » Cage ban in Austria
- **The council of Europe**: from 1998: 19 versions of housing recommendations ... no agreement, no legislation
- **EFSA report 2005**: contested and no consequences for a legislation
- **The Netherlands**: directive in 2006
- **Germany**: campaign in the media by “Vierpfoten” in 2007
- **France** : L214
- **Belgium** :
 - Eastern 2009 : actions by GAIA (**cage = prison - jail**)
 - Eastern 2010 : new campaigns by « Vierpfoten » in Germany, by « Viervoeters » in the Netherlands and “GAIA” in Belgium

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The problem: the future of rabbit production.



Intensive rabbit farming:

- **Increasing opposition** against the actual housing in small barren cages: **actions!**
- **Supermarkets** in many countries (in Switzerland, Holland, Germany, Belgium, ...): already now or in the future only meat from rabbits “alternatively” housed
- **No EC legislation** regulation with regard to commercial rabbit housing
- **Other animal productions**: significant changes in housing (layers, sows, calves) but
 - ❖ **Rabbits**: STILL in small cages, individual (females)
 - ❖ **Rabbit production: fragile industry**
 - Still “caged” animals
 - Small sector (weak power), compared to pigs, poultry
 - The rabbit: high perception as “pet” animal: emotionally

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Housing of rabbits in Belgium: from problems to a solution ...

➤ **Actions of GAIA (2009-2010)** → **Minister** → asks advise
from his "Animal Welfare Council"

"A working group on rabbits was installed"

- ❖ **Members:**
 - From the responsible Ministry
 - From "The animal right organisations"
 - From "Rabbit breeder associations"
 - Slaughterhouse + Retail
 - "Experts"
- ❖ **During 2 years:** 11 meetings of this workgroup & hard discussions ...
BUT the sector AND the animal rights organisations were both asking for a solution

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The challenge was ...

To improve the living conditions of rabbits in COMMERCIAL rabbitries **AND**

to guarantee COMMERCIAL production (productivity, to amortize the investment costs, balance with other animal productions, ...)

First conclusions of workgroup:

1. None of the existing systems meet the behavioural needs BUT welfare needs are more likely guaranteed in **enriched park systems**
2. Lack of research → Lack of evolution and improvement in animal welfare on rabbit farms
3. To develop a legislation; a **step by step plan** from 2015 off: **"from cage to park housing"**

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In 2013 agreement in ... 2015 legislation

After 2 years of hard discussions;
 ... a marriage (wedding) without love ...
 ... and a “step by step” plan: **from cage to park**



President of the Farmers Association in Belgium (P. Van Themsche) and President of GAIA (M. Vandenbosch), NGO defending animal rights

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The housing legislation: A “step by step” transition from cage to park (Step 1)

From August 2014 off: **FOR ALL EXISTING FARMS**

- **Gnawing material** (wooden stick, block, straw, ...): **always**
- **When housed on wire:** a comfort zone (footrest, straw or other material) is obliged
- **No individual fattening** (min. **group size: 4**)
- For **does:**
 - min. 15 weeks old at first service
 - min. 3 days before giving birth → nestbox, nesting material
- Target values regarding **climate**



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The housing legislation: A “step by step” transition from cage to park (Step 1)

From 2014 : for new farms or renovated farms:

- **Only fattening allowed in enriched parks**
- **Maternity:** enriched cages still allowed



“**Enriched cage**”: cage equipped with enrichment materials (platform ?)

- Surface min. 3 000 cm² (if for a doe)
- or a density of max. de 16 rabbits/m² (if for fatteners)



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The “step by step” change: STEP 2

From 2016 off:

- All **weaned rabbits** in enriched park systems
- **Exceptions:**
 - ❖ Breeders declaring to finish before 2020 (may still use the cages till 2020)
 - ❖ Breeders who invested (before 1st Jan 2013) in enriched cages: still allowed till 2025 to use them for fattening too
 - ❖ If enriched park systems installed before 2016, still allowed to be used till 2025



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The “step by step” change: STEP 3

From 2021 off:

- All **does** have to be housed in enriched park systems
- **On condition that:** research in Belgium and/or abroad has demonstrated that “equal” production can be obtained in park systems (evaluation in 2015) (will be in 2017)
- **Exception:** if enriched cages installed before 2016: allowed till 2025



However, the responsible Minister will define the exact conditions and can modify the definitions of enriched parks and enriched cages and also the obligation concerning the housing of does.

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Examples of park housing : good and less good ...



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Definition of park housing (1)

Minimum standards for housing meat rabbits:

1. **Space allowance:**
 - At least one side: min. 180 cm
 - No height limitations (open top)
2. **Stocking density:**
 - Min. 20 rabbits / park
 - Density: $\geq 800 \text{ cm}^2$ / rabbit
3. **Floor: no wire**
 - Plastic slats
 - Wire bottom: only if 80% is covered with (plastic) footrests
4. **Different floor levels;** min. 25%, max. 40% of the floor area (is extra surface for the density criterion)



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Definition of park housing (2)

5. **Gnawing and hiding material:**
 - Permanently available: blocks of wood, ...
 - Tubes (diameter of 160 mm, length of 40 cm)
6. **Feed and water:**
 - Available all times; 1 nipple/20 animal; 2 nipples/park
 - Hay/straw rack
7. **Duration of housing in parks**
 - At least for 4 weeks before slaughtering housed in a "park"



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Support by the Government for the change

In the context of supporting of professional farmers for a sustainable investment

- Investment for an improved liveability in innovative systems (risk)
 - Investments to save energy
 - Investments to reduce emissions (improve the air quality)
- Each demand is judged for these criteria and receives points (+ for young farmers, + if the support is necessary to invest, +...)
- For times a year a classification is made with the demands, and the highest scores receive support till the budget is exhausted.

The support is 30% (highest scores of durability) or 15%

E.g. the building of a rabbit house: 15% while the equipment (parks) 30%

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Actual situation in Belgium & the Netherlands

Slaughter houses ask for park rabbits:

- Because most large retailers: sell only park rabbits
- Pay a higher price to breeders (but is reduced year by year ...)



About 50% of the breeders have changed to park housing for fatteners

- "Home made parks" and **Menighin**, Momeck, Chabeauti, ... parks
- In total about 200 000 – 250 000 fattening park places
- Some farms have "polyvalent parks" : used for does and fattening

Marketing problems:

- Production costs are 30 - 40 eurocent/kg higher
- But distinction in the market is difficult (certification is necessary!)

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Park housing of fatteners

**If in small groups (<40) and
if not older than 11 weeks:**

- Prod. performances: -3 -5%
- If >11 wks: fighting risks and losses increase



However problems with the bottom: plastic slats (min. 80%-!)

- Less hygienic, sometimes difficult to clean and disinfect
- Plastic slats vs wire : 50% – 20 % of the floor is closed
- Some farms have “polyvalent parks” : used for does and fattening

Marketing problems:

- Production costs are 30 - 40 eurocent/kg higher
- But distinction in the market is difficult (certification is necessary!)

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Alternative housing of does: A challenge

Group housing of female rabbits: many efforts but ...

- Continuous group housing: **no acceptable production performances and welfare under commercial conditions**
- **Semi or part-time group housing of females:** promising results in B (Maertens et al.,) and the NL (Rommers et al., ...) with connecting cages ...

OUR Purpose in 2011: to develop an innovative part-time group housing system suitable for does and fatteners : “Polyvalent Park Systems”

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The challenge was: to integrate the strong points into an “alternative housing system”

Strong points

- “All in all out”
- Single batch
- Polyvalent rooms / housing
- AI
- Automatic feeding
-



Weak points:

- Small “cages”
- Individual
- No enrichments
- Wire flooring
- ...



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Production performances and welfare of rabbit does in a part-time group housing system

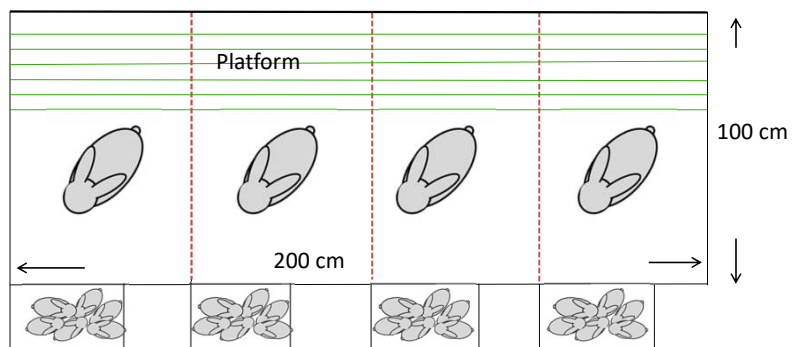


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A semi-group housing system for does (polyvalent park system)



50 cm x 100 cm/female: surface of 5 000 cm²

With enrichments: platform, gnawing material, ...)

Elimination of the separations : ...we obtain a « park »

3 weeks individual – 3 weeks in group

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“Park” unit: experimental



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“Park” unit: commercial



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Cage unit



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Summarised design

❖ House with two identical rooms each equipped with :

- 24 females in enriched cages (control group)
- 6 “parks” with wire floor + footrests: 24 females
- 6 “parks” with plastic floor: 24 females

❖ Animals and management

- Hycole hybrids
- Primiparous does (litters 2, 3, 4 and 5 were studied)
- “Spare” females in a separate room (cage and parks !!)
- Always 72 (3 x 24) pregnant/females in each cycle

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The 3 experimental treatments

« Enriched cages »:

Floor: wire + footrest



1 female / cage
Or 7 young after weaning

Polyvalent « Park »

Floor: **wire + footrests**



4 females / park
or 32 young after weaning

Polyvalent « Park »

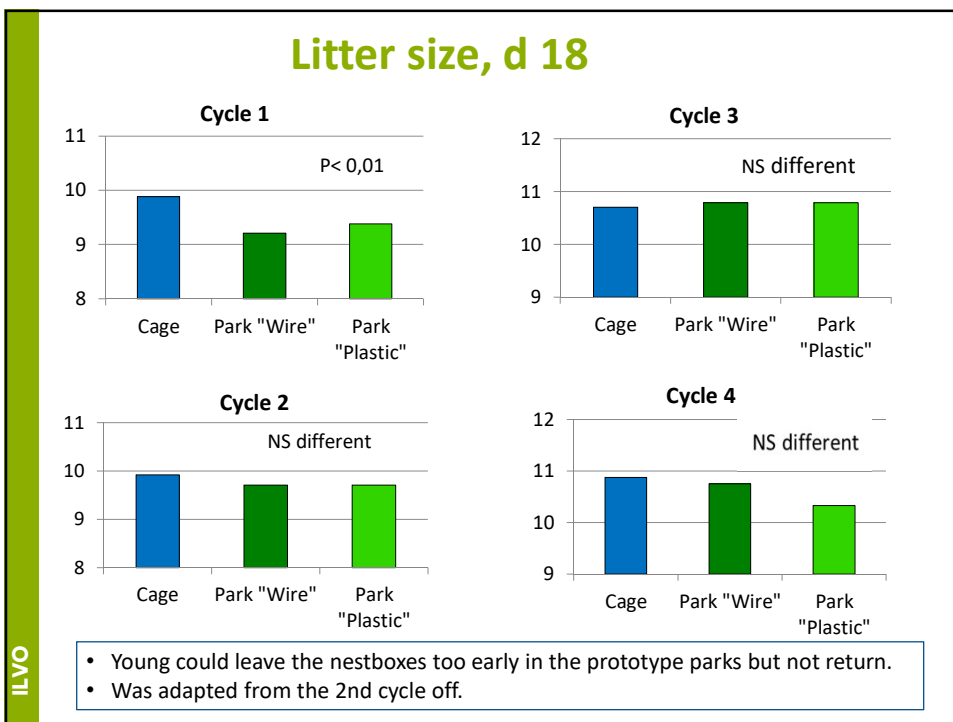
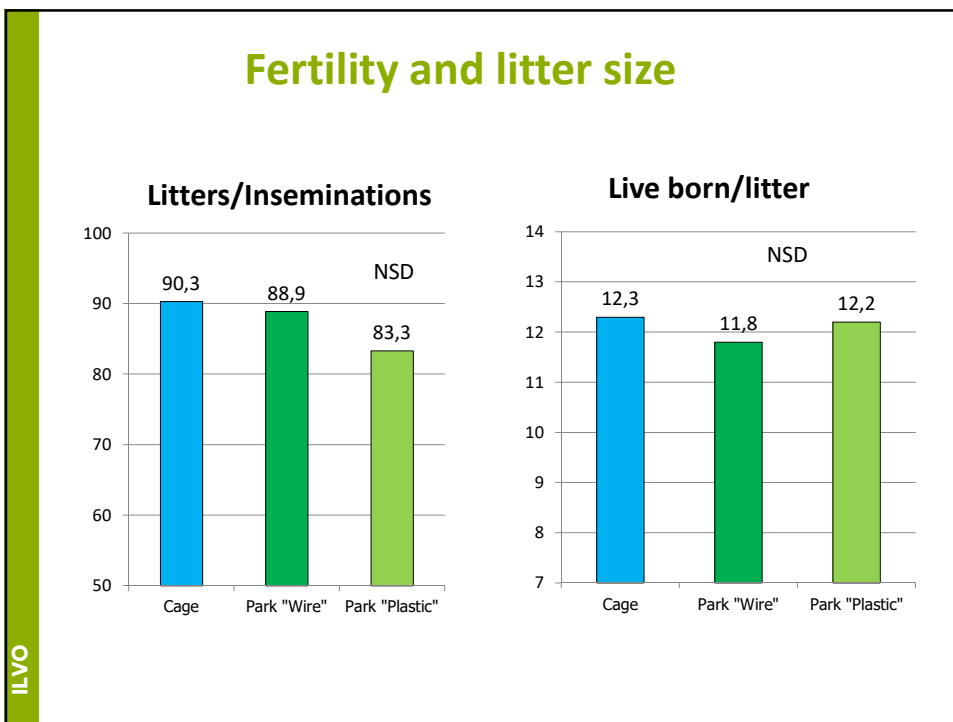
Floor: **plastic**



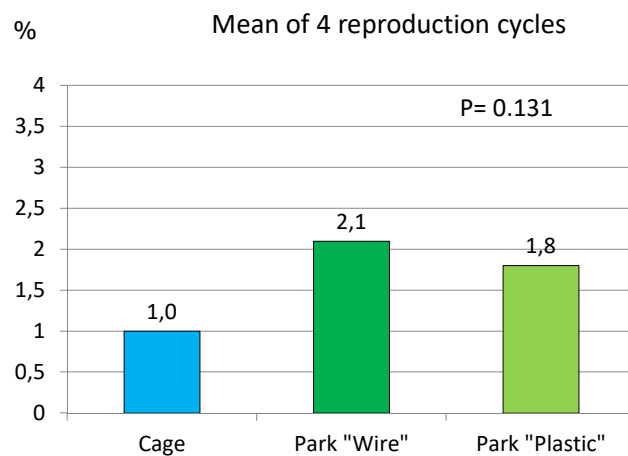
4 femelles / park
or 32 young after weaning

Comparison of the **production performances**, behavior, welfare related traits and health of does and fatteners

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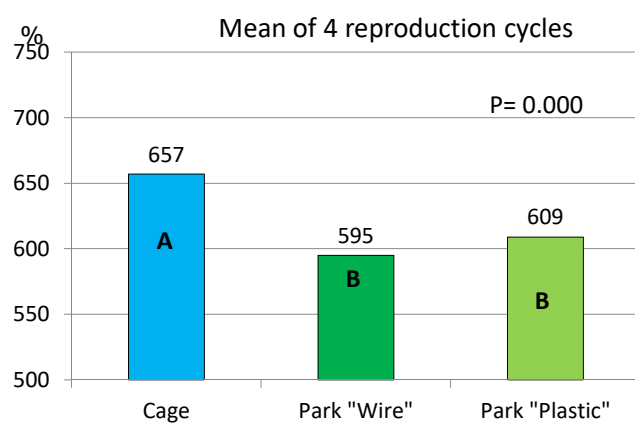
Losses of young between d 18 and weaning



Nipple drinkers were too high in park systems, adapted from the 2nd cycle off.

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Young weight at 29 days



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Overview of the production performances

	Parks		Cage	P		
	"Wire"	"Plastic"		Housing	Litter	Inter-action
N° litters	96	96	95	-	-	-
Litter size at weaning	9.90	9.91	10.23	0.002	0.000	0.02
Young weight, day 29, g	595	609	657	0,000	0,000	0,039
Total weaned young /treatment	950	952	972	-	-	-

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Conclusions

❖ **Performances** were somewhat lower in the park system

- Fertility: \pm 5% (non significant différent))
- N° weaned/litter: 2-3% less (P<0.01)
- Weight at weaning: \pm -7% (P<0.001)

A part can be explained by the construction errors of the experimental parks (nestboxes , nipple drinkers)

❖ **But the performances were very high**, and in parks even higher than average results in commercial farms.

❖ **The floor** had no impact on the production performances

❖ **Part-time grouphousing:** improved welfare??? More work and motivation of the farmer is necessary.

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Thank you for the
attention

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