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Introduction

This response to the Rabbit Code v.9 seeks also to inform you of the formation of the rabbit section of the Companion Animal Sector Council (CASC), formed to take forward the DEFRA ANIMAL HEALTH & WELFARE STRATEGY. The sections of CASC are still developing, the equine sector led by NEWC produced an extremely good document, CASC are using their 'model' to look at Rabbits, Birds, Small Mammals, Fish, Reptiles & Amphibia, PAC are developing a section covering dogs and cats.

Sections have now been established and groups of stakeholders are working in all of these areas to develop formal strategies and codes of practice and care sheets. It is obviously the feeling of all of the groups that since they represent stakeholders with species knowledge that they represent the best sources for information about their areas.

In the rabbit group, so far we have representatives from:

- Rabbit Welfare Association (RWA)
- British Rabbit Council (BRC)
- Federation of Companion Animal Societies (FOCAS)
- Pets at Home
- Pet Care Trust (PCT)
- Burgess Feeds
- LANTRA
- EIG

It is envisaged other specialists will become involved as this develops. RSPCA have been invited to participate.

Comments on the Code v.9.

RWA, BRC and Steve Fairburn of Pets at Home who are all members of our group have all already made extensive comments so here we will focus on fewer.

There is much of the information in the code which could be applied to virtually all companion animals, rather than just rabbits, the introductory page and all the legal material are common as is some of the text eg re transporting in cars. Since many/most companion animal owners keep multiple animals there may be merit in producing a general introduction and legal section which then need not be repeated. The meat then of the text relating specifically to the rabbit etc can then be focussed on.

The title directs the code at domesticated rabbits, whilst page 7 says they can never be truly domesticated. Does this then mean the code is aimed at rabbits kept as pets at home. This is very important since rabbits are kept in all sorts of circumstances and the code must be specific to avoid its being used out of context. Rabbits are kept 'at home' indoors as houserabbits, or 'at home' out in a hutch, or 'at home' in a rabbitry building by breeders. They are also kept in rabbitry buildings away from homes or as future pets in retail premises.

The use of the word companion is of course wider, CAWC uses - "Companion Animal" shall mean any animal which for the time being and from time to time shall be kept by man as a

companion, whether or not such an animal shall also be kept by man for purposes other than as a companion.

Domestication usually implies some form of phenotypic modification by selective breeding and this is obvious in the rabbit. It is domesticated. In English law the camel was once found to be domesticated. The argument about wild behaviour applies even to dogs and cats which show many of the traits shown by wild dogs and cats.

The comments re weatherproof hutches have been dealt with elsewhere.

- Define which group the code seeks to deal with.

It is not possible to give hutch measurements since there are over 50 breeds of different sizes and temperaments.

Bold statements re keeping guinea pigs and rabbits together almost suggest that would be an offence yet generations of people have done and still do it. Much of the reasoning is flawed, however it is possible to suggest that rabbits should have hutch-mates of a similar size, the damage issue applied as much to a small rabbit kept with a large one as a guinea pig kept with a large rabbit. Rabbits don't need extra vitamin C but using this as a reason for not keeping them together is meaningless, it isn't toxic.

Microchipping rabbits is not simple, there is a strong argument for this being done only by vets and only when anaesthetised – perhaps at neutering. Rabbits can damage themselves struggling. The chip does not help find them should they become lost, it helps identify a found rabbit if the finder scans the rabbit. Rabbits do not 'stray' as much as dogs and cats, and the value must be looked at against the risks.

The diet section would be better reviewing the natural diet and explaining that commercial diets are available and that instructions should be followed, by all means with examples. Since rabbit digestive problems are such a big issue this needs some thorough but simple explanation. Owners need to be aware that changing diets is fraught with problems. Information on diets at lifestages is useful, breeds do not differ.

Weight ranges differ with the various breeds, so avoid them.

Repeated soiling of the 'bottom' should be investigated, it can occur with back pain or with diarrhoea.

Pet shops do supply care sheets with basic info giving guidance on characteristics, this code could usefully finish with a skeleton care sheet.

More explanation re the vaccines available would be useful and less suggesting rabbits being neutered at any age. Like ALL domestic animals it is done by a vet under anaesthetic, this is superfluous.

Since neutering counters the need to express all behavioural needs (ie, the need for males to fight and for females to be pregnant or nursing and die younger) then perhaps a little explanation about the expression and provision of this 'need' would be useful.

'Straining' over urine or faeces, or repeated soiling of the 'bottom' should be added to the list of indications of illness.

Add biting flies to the vectors for myxomatosis.

Pasteurellosis is the ailment caused by *Pasteurella multocida*.

Stress / dietary changes and consequent bloat/ mucoid enteritis etc should be added to the list of common ailments.

Finally, our group would be happy to participate in further consultations on rabbits and the various associated groups within CASC would be similarly pleased to help with their areas of interest.

Peter Scott FRCVS
Acting Chair of the Rabbit Group of CASC