

American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc.

Devoted to the Interest of Rabbit Raising for Fancy and Commercial
Parent Body of All Chartered Local and Specialty Clubs
One National Judging and Registration System

To the membership of the ARBA,

In March of 2020 the reportable disease in rabbits, Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD), mutated and began to infect the predominant wild rabbit populations in the continental United States – jack rabbits and American cottontails. Until March of 2020, it was thought that RHD would predominantly infect only domestic rabbits that were descended from European wild rabbits, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*. While the infections originated in New Mexico, the virus is steadily spreading across the southwestern United States and it is only a matter of time before this virus becomes endemic in the United States. **As ARBA members, we must be prepared for this new normal.**

These developments are going to change the landscape of raising rabbits in the United States. We have colleagues and friends in Europe who have been dealing with this disease for decades and many of them have adjusted to this new normal. As with any disease, there will be an adjustment period followed by a recalibration of how we move forward and promote the rabbit industry. Every single member will need to help us adjust to this new way of raising rabbits. Below are some key preventative measures we all need to begin implementing as soon as possible:

Rabbit Breeders

- Monitor daily for signs of RHD, which consist primarily of bleeding from the nose, anus, or vagina. Other more subtle signs can include yellowing of the skin and bleeding in the white portion of the eye.
- Bookmark your state veterinarian's information so you can readily access this if you suspect an outbreak is present.
- Quarantine every single rabbit that enters your barn for at least 14 days. You should not bring rabbits into your barn from a state that has an active outbreak of RHD.
- Restrict access to wildlife in your rabbitry. Your facility should not have any spaces to allow small rabbits or rodents to enter.
- Disinfect all items thoroughly with a 1:10 dilution of bleach and make sure you remove all organic matter prior to disinfection.
- Voluntarily elect to not enter any rabbits in a show if an outbreak has been present in your county.
- Establish a good rapport with your local veterinarian. As the disease spreads, availability of two foreign vaccines from Europe may be relaxed and can be administered only by a licensed veterinarian.
- Educate your friends and neighbors about RHD. If they begin to see wild rabbits that spontaneously die on their property with blood from any orifice, they should contact their state veterinarian.
- Discourage transport of animals from any region with an active outbreak in the last four months.
- If and when vaccines are widely available for protection against RHD, strongly consider utilizing them.

Clubs

- Be aware that this disease is spreading and outbreaks can be unpredictable. You may need to consider rescheduling or cancelling your show on a moment's notice.
- After every single rabbit show, remove all organic debris from the cages, coops, judging tables, and any other hard surface and then thoroughly disinfect. An inexpensive and effective option is a 1:10 dilution of bleach.
- Exercise caution about hiring judges from areas where there are active outbreaks and be prepared to operate on a reduced judging capacity should those judges become unavailable.

Judges and Registrars

- Monitor the outbreaks that will now occur on a regular basis. If they have occurred in your county, reconsider your future judging assignments for the next four months.
- Thoroughly disinfect your hands as frequently as possible while judging. Most alcohol-based disinfectants are quick, inexpensive, and kill virus.
- If while judging you come across a rabbit that exhibits any signs of hemorrhage whatsoever, work with the sponsoring club to ensure that this rabbit is removed from the building, the remainder of the rabbits owned by the breeder are removed from the building, and any surface that the rabbit contacted is thoroughly disinfected.
- Be aware that as more rabbits are vaccinated for RHD, there may be a soft mass present between the shoulder blades. This should not be disqualified as it is an accumulation of inflammatory cells and thus not consistent with an abscess.

Please know that the ARBA is advocating to the USDA and other relevant stakeholders with your best interests in mind. We are recommending that foreign vaccine importation restrictions be eased and are working with companies that may have the ability to distribute a US-made vaccine stateside and allow rabbit breeders access to an option if their state does not have an active outbreak. This will only be accessible through a veterinarian. Until this time, it is imperative that all ARBA members take the steps outlined above to prevent further spread of this deadly disease. When we receive any new information, we will share it with the membership as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Jay Hreiz, VMD
ARBA Rabbit & Cavy Health Committee Chair



From the desk of the Jay E. Hreiz, VMD
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