

FEED:GAIN RATIOS

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Feed represents 75% or more of the total operating cost of rabbit production. Because of this, it is useful to know how much feed is used for each unit of marketable product whether that be Angora wool, fryers, pets, breeding or laboratory stock or other outputs. Fryer producers refer to this measure of feed:product as the feed:gain ratio. It is computed by dividing the pounds of feed used by the pounds of fryers sold. (The latter should include rabbits butchered for home consumption but not cull breeding stock.) This will give a ratio such as 4.5:1 which means that for every 4.5 lb. of feed used, 1 lb. of fryer was sold. This generally is shortened and only the first number, the 4.5, is stated.

This ratio is useful because it gives an immediate indication of how you are doing. Let's assume you buy 2300 lb. of feed in a month and sell 500 lb. of fryers. The feed:gain ratio is $2300/500 = 4.60$. If the feed costs \$6.00 for a 50 lb. bag, it is 12 cents per pound. That means you have spent $4.6 \times \$0.12 = \0.55 for the feed needed for each pound of gain. If the fryers sell for \$.60 per pound, \$.55 of that goes for feed so there is only 5 cents ($\$0.60 - \0.55) left to pay for the electricity, water, transportation, debt service, and other expenses. These costs have been estimated to be \$.10-\$.15 per pound so this obviously is not a profitable operation! Remember, labor, especially yours, gets paid last (if there is any money left). This calculation should include all the feed that is used. It would be nice if we could ignore the feed eaten by the breeding stock and replacements, but the fryers have to pay the expenses for all the rabbits so all the feed gets entered into the calculation.

Many factors influence the feed: gain ratio. Age of the fryers, "poor doers," excessive fines, scrabblers, rats, mice and other freeloaders, non-productive does, too many bucks, severe weather, and diseases all can adversely affect the feed:gain ratio.

As fryers get older, it takes more feed for each pound of gain. Feed intake increases steadily as the fryers age but the rate of gain reaches a peak about six weeks after birth and then declines. Because of this, it is important to market fryers as soon as they reach market weight. After about 10 weeks, it may cost more for the feed the rabbit needs to gain a pound than the pound is worth when you sell the rabbit. This is why "poor doers" should be culled as soon as they are spotted. Also, rabbits that develop enteritis should be culled because the feed they eat in the extra week or more they will need to reach market weight will probably cost you money.

Loss of feed from excessive fines, broken pellets, and pellets scrabbled out of the feeder can be substantial. To avoid these losses, you should buy good quality feed and then handle it with care. That means not throwing the sacks or walking or sitting on them, and not allowing the feed to get damp. Scrabblers can be an expensive problem. Scrabble guards in the feeders will sometimes stop the habit, but if it can't be stopped, the trouble maker(s) should be culled. Kits waste a lot of feed while they are learning to eat but if the pellets are small and short, that will be minimized.

The amounts of feed eaten or destroyed by rodents can be substantial. If your feed:gain ratio is too high, check to be sure that all the feed you buy for your rabbits is actually getting into their mouths. A female rat will eat as much as an ounce of feed each day and can produce over 40 young in the course of a year. The feed eaten quickly becomes pounds per day. Rats can be a serious problem in the rabbitry not only because of what they eat, but also because they contaminate feed by urinating on it so the rabbits won't eat it.

Non-productive does and too many bucks can increase your feed bill. Probably the most common occurrence is the doe which is difficult to breed. If a doe takes two or three services for every litter it produces, it is wasting production time and obviously is costing you more money than the doe that always conceives on the first service. (This is even more costly if you don't palpate to determine pregnancy, but that is a topic for another article.) Keeping too many bucks also costs money. Conventional wisdom calls for one buck for every 10 does.

This certainly is the maximum number of bucks needed and many producers get along with fewer than that. It is easy to keep an extra buck "just in case" and forget that it is there. It doesn't forget to eat though and that four ounces of feed each day costs you money.

The most general effect of weather on production is the summer slump in breeding due to the heat. As a result, the feed:gain ratio seen in September or October may seem excessive. A bit of checking shows the does produced fewer and smaller litters in July and August so there are fewer fryers to sell in the fall.

Pet rabbits can also cost money. Everyone has them - the old doe who has produced 20 litters and is living out her days at your expense, the buck who is the sire of half the rabbits in your unit, the little doe you bottle raised, etc. Keeping these animals indicates a measure of compassion necessary for the good stockman, but care has to be taken that the number doesn't become excessive.

Regardless of the type of production, the profits in rabbit production are slim. It is important to be sure that the slight profit possible is not eaten up by feed wastage. Feed:gain ratios give an indication if this is happening.