EFSA scientific opinion on rabbit welfare

Denise Candiani

Animal and Plant Health (ALPHA) Unit

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European Food Safety Authority

Background

- 180 million rabbits farmed for meat annually in the EU
- 66% of the total EU production kept in conventional farms: medium and large size farms (>600 breeding does) all over Europe (about 4500 farms producing)
- Public concerns: poor welfare, high stress, high mortality, no specific stunning methods
- No species-specific legislation protecting the welfare of farmed rabbits exists in the EU

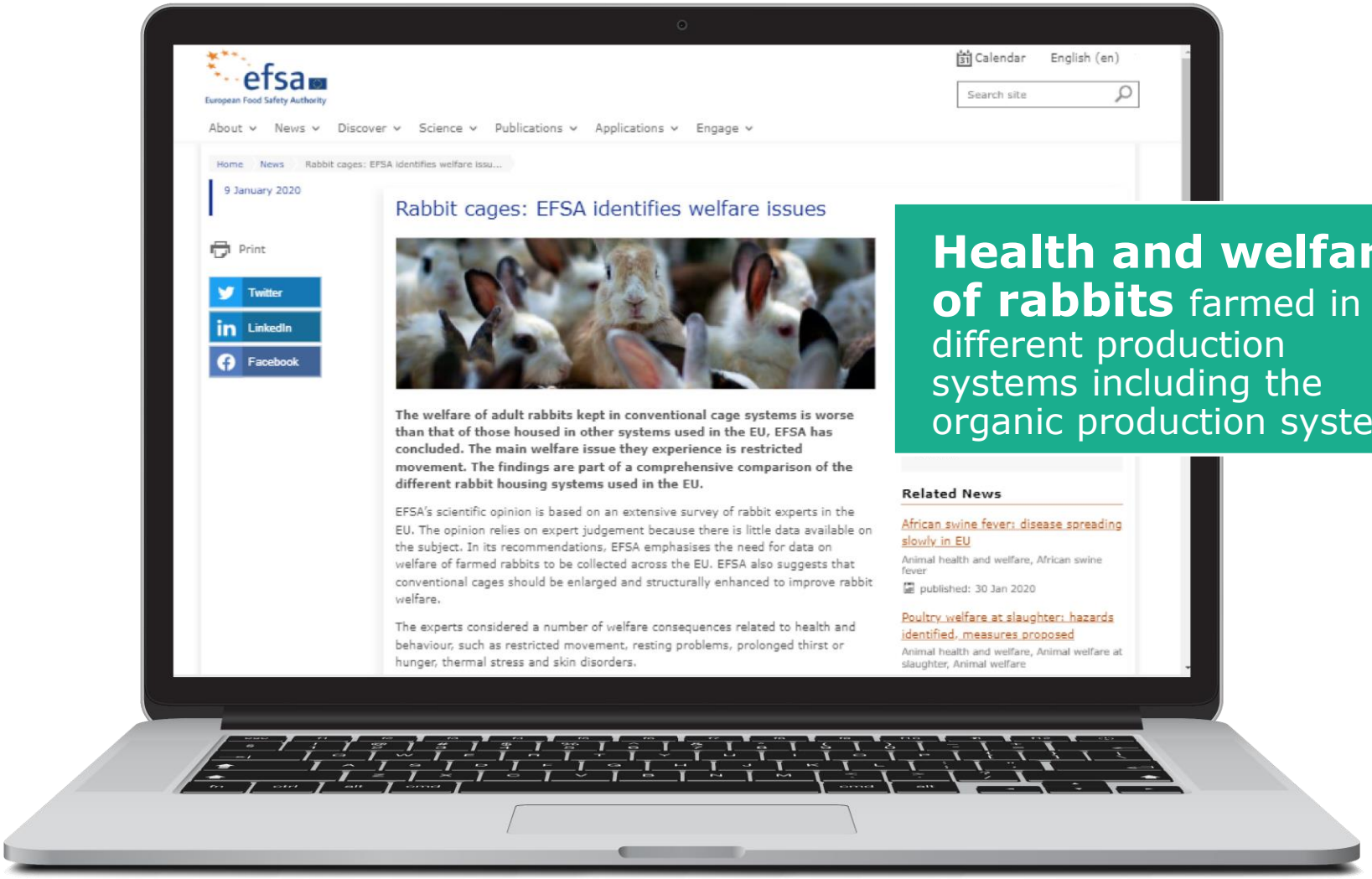
Request from European Parliament

EP resolution on minimum standards for the protection of farmed rabbits

Request to EFSA to provide scientific advice on:

- **Health and welfare of rabbits farmed in different production systems including the organic production system** (Scientific opinion 1)
- **"Stunning methods and slaughter of rabbits for human consumption"** (Scientific opinion 2)
- **"Killing methods for rabbits** (not for human consumption)" (Scientific opinion 3)

Scientific opinion 1



Health and welfare of rabbits farmed in different production systems including the organic production system

Step 1: define animal categories

Animal categories

Reproducing does

Kits

Growing rabbits

Step 2: identify housing systems

Conventional production

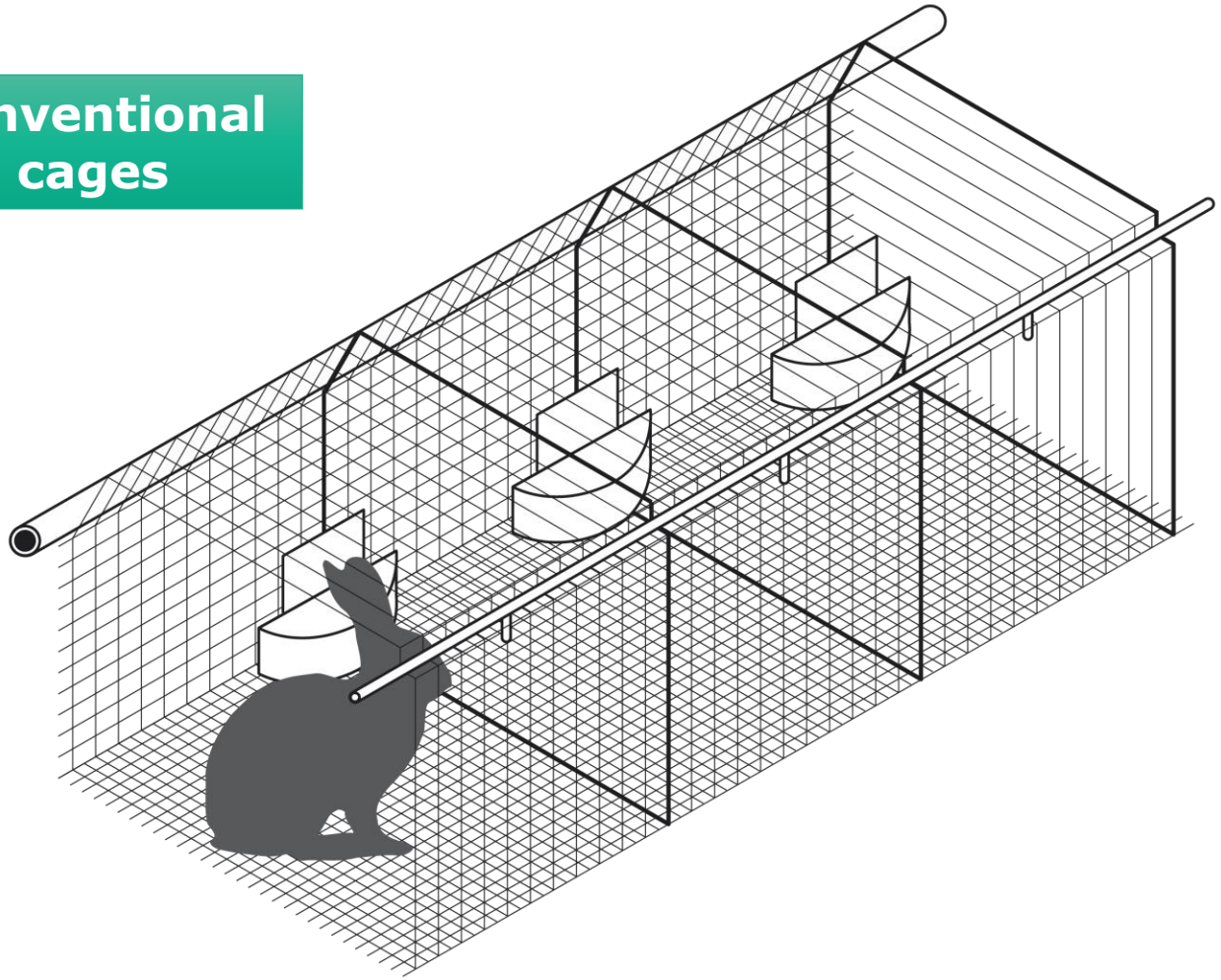
- Conventional cages
- Structurally enriched cages
- Elevated pens (indoor parks)

'Niche' production

- Floor pens (indoor parks)
- Outdoor /partially outdoor systems
- Organic systems

Examples of conventional rabbit housing systems

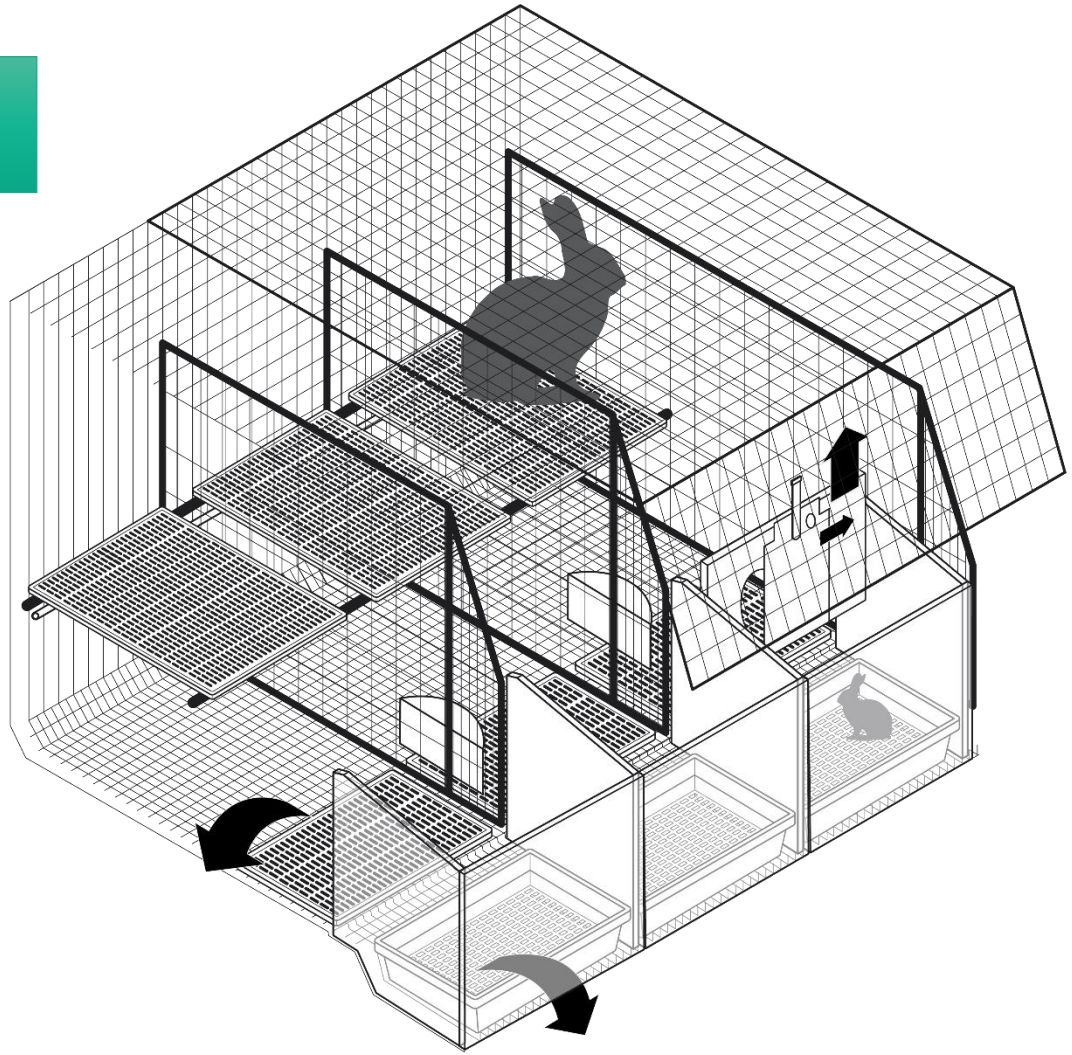
Conventional cages



- wire cages with plastic footrests
- equipped only with a feeder, a drinker and a nest area
- dual purpose (doe and its litter or growing rabbits in small groups)

Examples of conventional rabbit housing systems

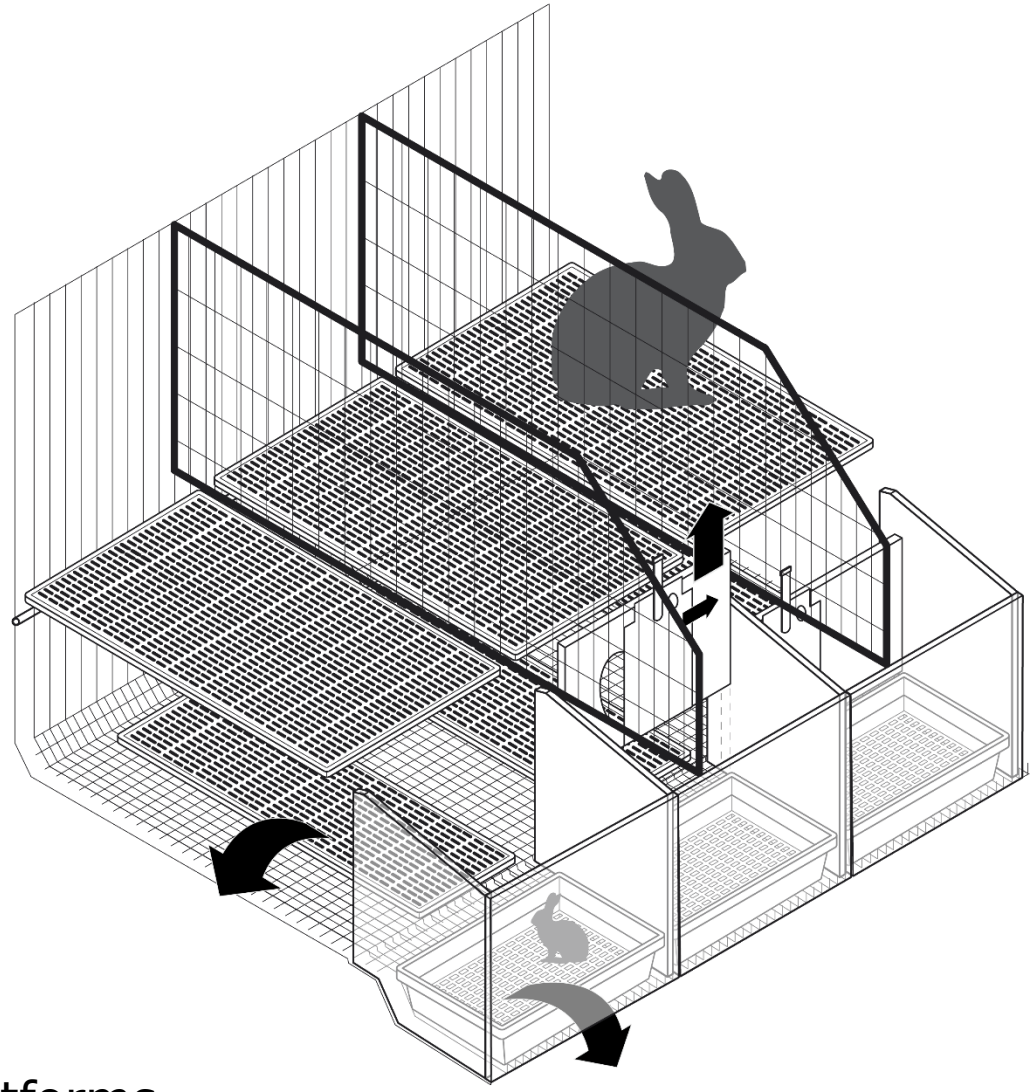
Enriched cages



- Wire cages
- Greater floor area and height
- Equipped with elevated platforms and plastic footrests
- Dual-purpose (doe and its litter or growing rabbits in small groups)

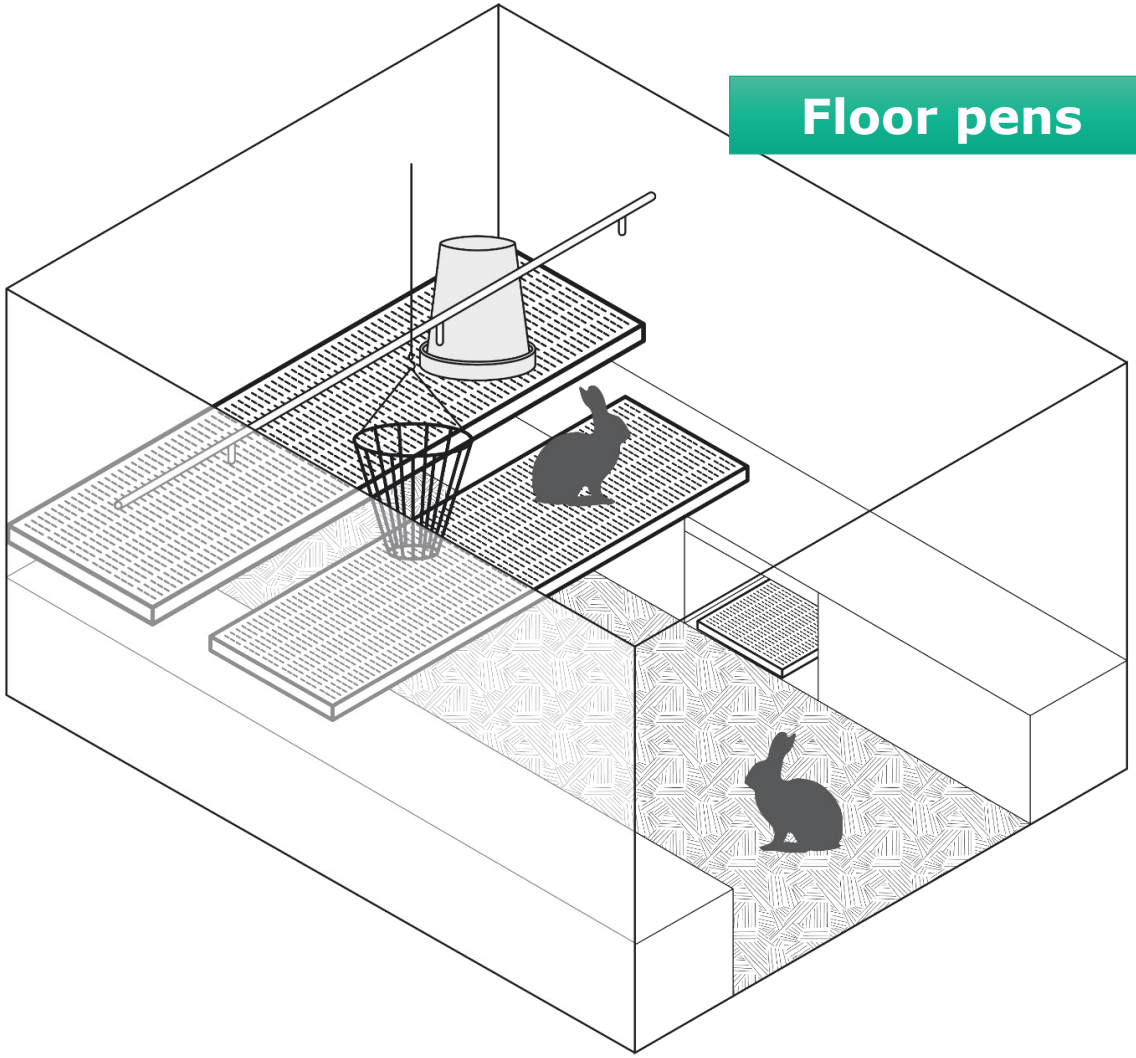
Examples of conventional rabbit housing systems

Elevated pens (parks)



- larger elevated pens
- slatted floors and platforms
- used for growing rabbits in large groups (32–36 rabbits)
- modules linked together for group housing of does by removing wire walls

Examples of niche production systems for rabbits



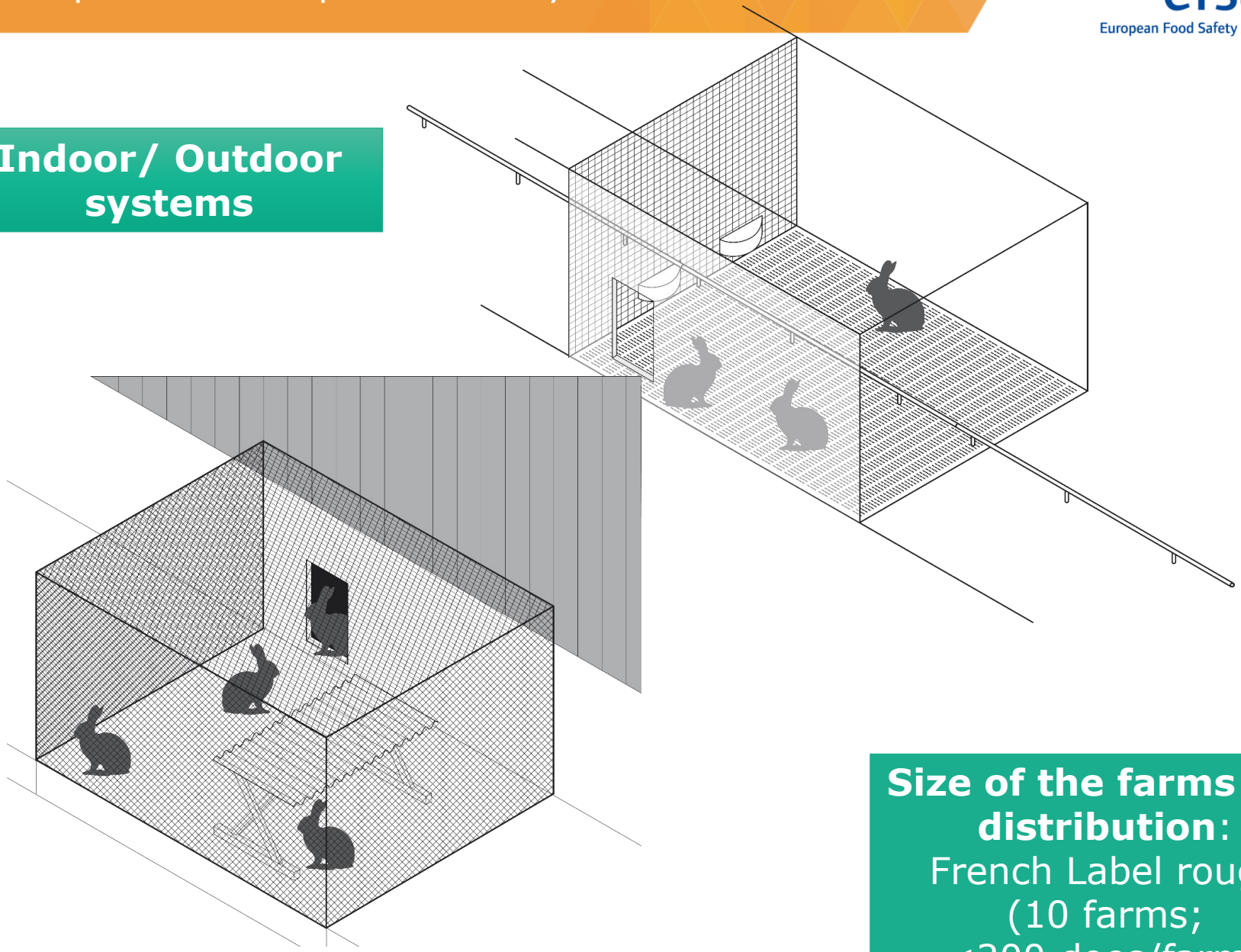
Floor pens

Size of the farms and distribution:
Swiss farms
(about 56 farms with 60 does/farm)

- open top larger pens with totally or partially solid floor
- bedding material, usually straw.
- group housing for does or growing rabbits

Examples of niche production systems for rabbits

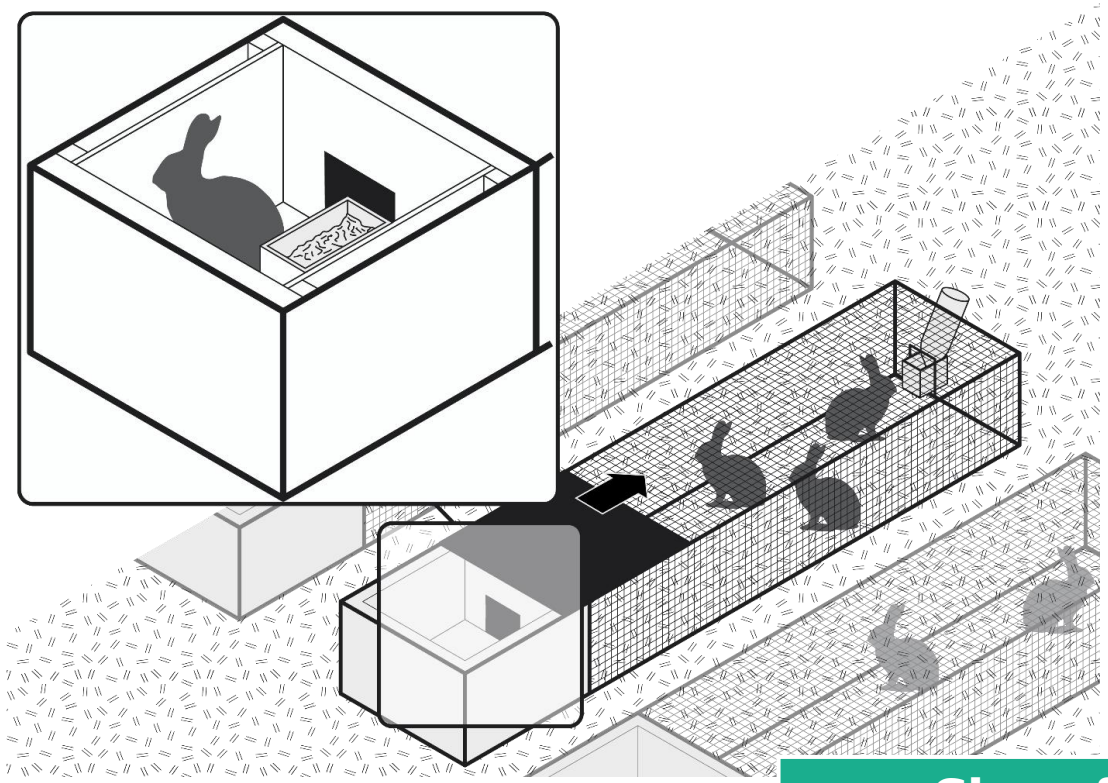
Indoor/ Outdoor systems



- Provide free access to outdoor area

Size of the farms and distribution:
French Label rouge
(10 farms;
<200 does/farm)

Examples of niche production systems for rabbits



Organic system

Size of the farms and distribution:
French system (50 farms; <50 does/farm)

- Covered by reg 2018/848
- Movable wire cages – to be moved outdoor for foraging on pasture
- Provide shelter including a dark hiding place
- No slatted floor, straw bedding, use of organic feed, use of robust breeds, no antibiotics, no hormones.

Step 3: identify welfare consequences

WELFARE CONSEQUENCES

Behaviour-related

- Restriction of movement
- Resting problem
- Inability to express maternal behaviour
- Inability to express positive social behaviour
- Inability to express gnawing behaviour
- Occurrence of abnormal behaviour
- Fear

Health-related

- Prolonged hunger
- Prolonged thirst
- Pododermatitis
- Locomotory disorders
- Skin lesions
- Respiratory disorders
- Gastro-intestinal disorders
- Skin disorders
- Reproductive disorders
- Mastitis
- Neonatal disorders
- Heat stress
- Cold stress

Examples of behaviour-related welfare consequences

RESTRICTION OF MOVEMENT

GNAWING BEHAVIOUR

SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

ABNORMAL BEHAVIOUR

Examples of health-related welfare consequences

SKIN LESIONS

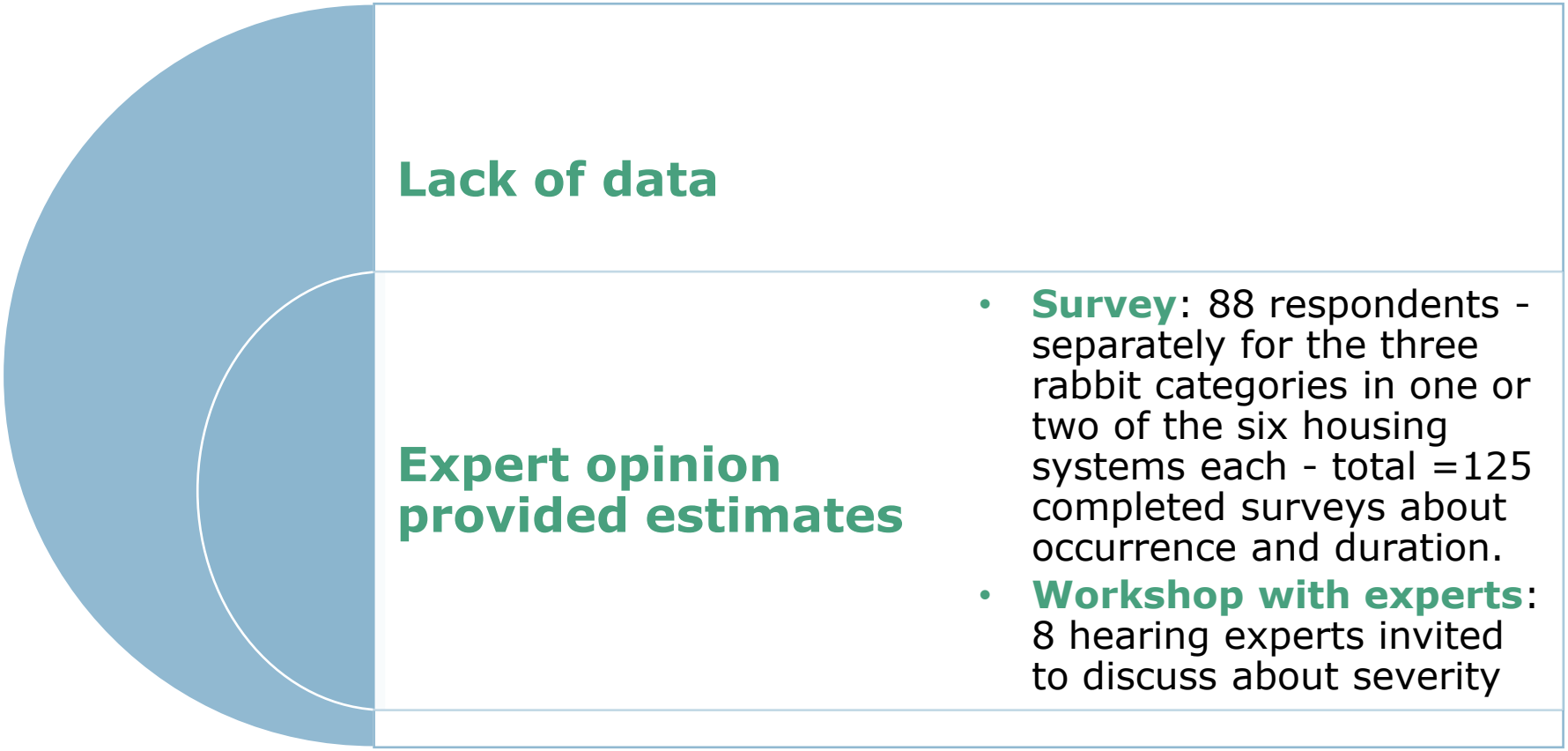
SKIN LESIONS FOR KITS

PODODERMATITIS

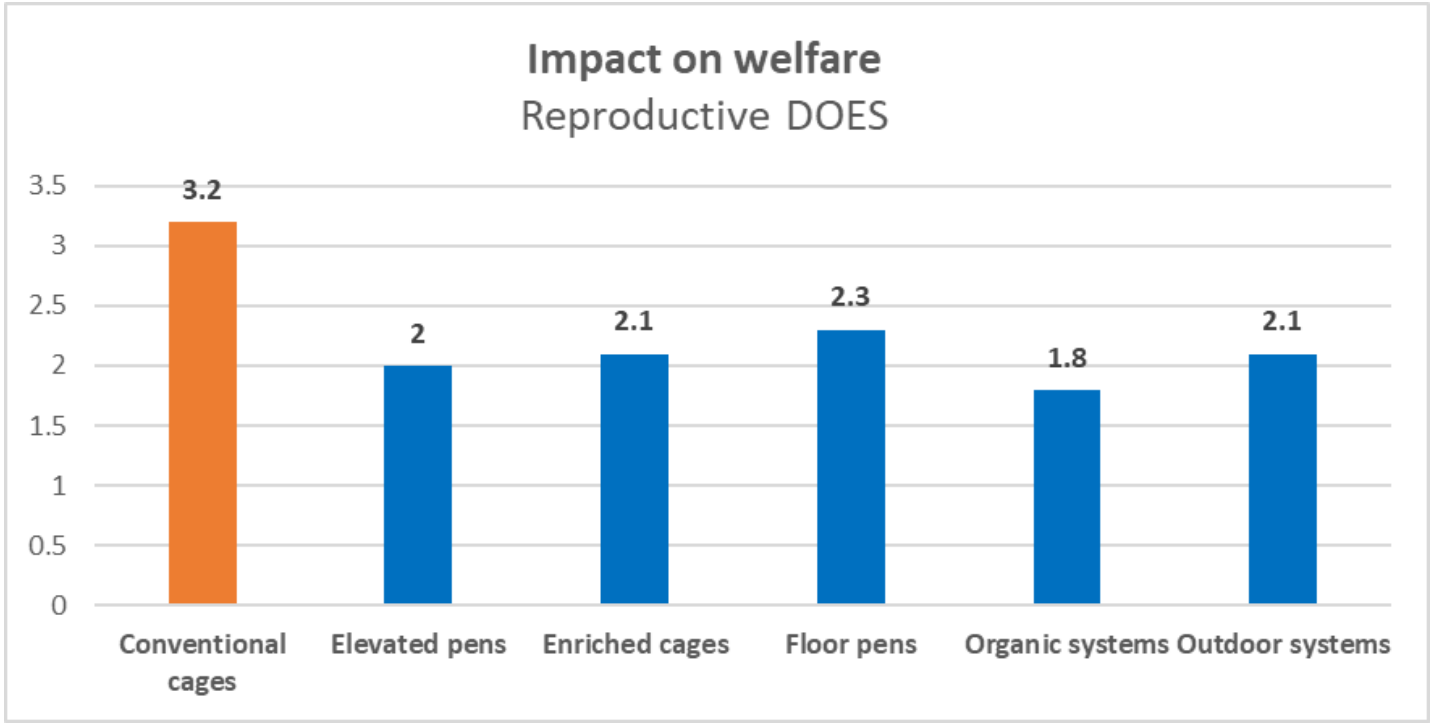
PROLONGED HUNGER

Step 4: measuring impact

IMPACT ON WELFARE= OCCURRENCE x DURATION X SEVERITY



Comparison of welfare in 6 housing systems: reproducing does



CONCLUSION:

The welfare of DOES is lower in conventional cages, but no distinction can be made among the five other housing systems.

Comparison of welfare in 6 housing systems: reproducing does

MAIN WELFARE CONSEQUENCES

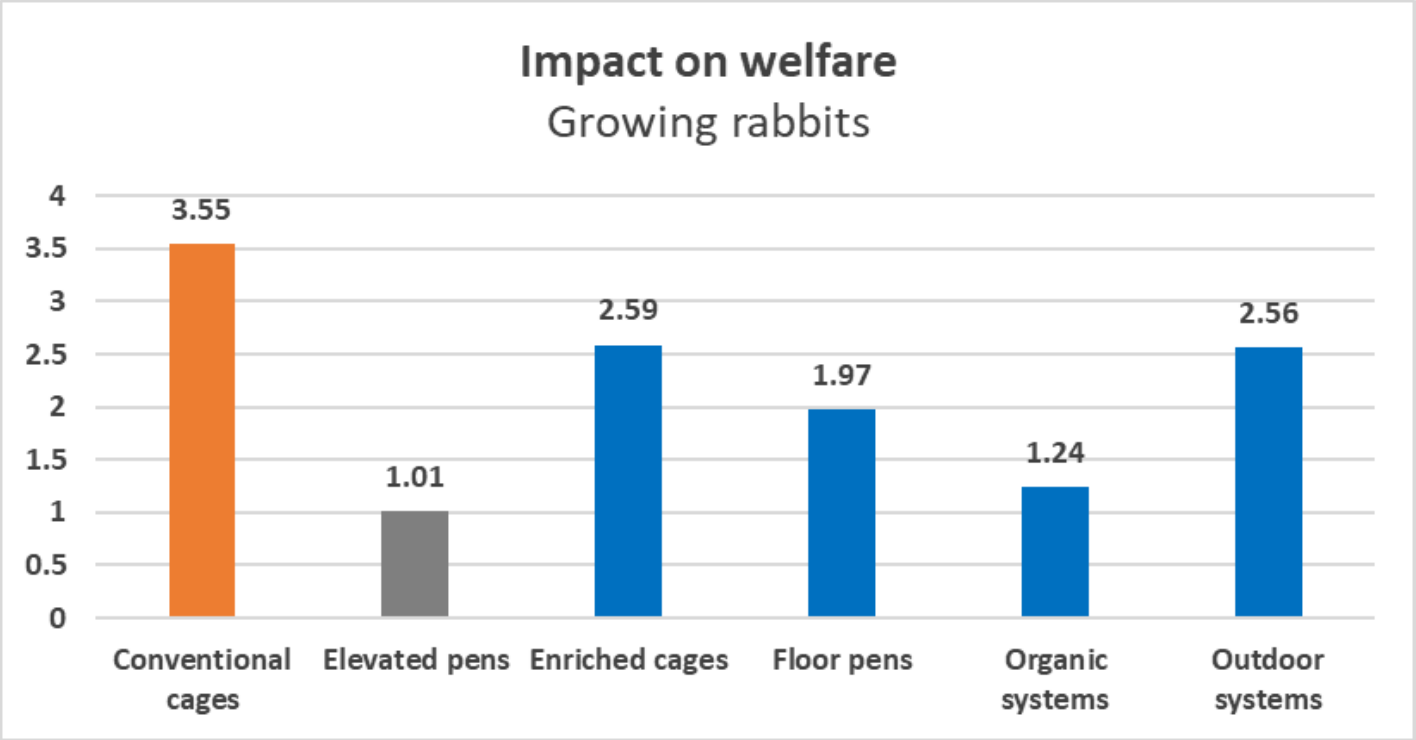
CONVENTIONAL CAGES

- **Restriction of movement**
- Inability to express gnawing behaviour
- Resting problem
- **Inability to express positive social behaviour**
- Heat stress

RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT CONVENTIONAL CAGES FOR DOES:

- Increase the size of the cages or add platforms that allow for efficient use of the cage (this means shift to enriched cages).
- Plastic foot mats to be provided; cage floors and plastic mats to be cleaned regularly.
- Thermal stress to be minimized by appropriate ventilation.
- Suitable gnawing materials (e.g. wooden sticks) to be supplied

Comparison of welfare in 6 housing systems: growing rabbits



CONCLUSION:

The welfare of GROWING RABBITS is lower in conventional cages, and higher in elevated pens.

Comparison of welfare in 6 housing systems: growing rabbits

MAIN WELFARE CONSEQUENCES

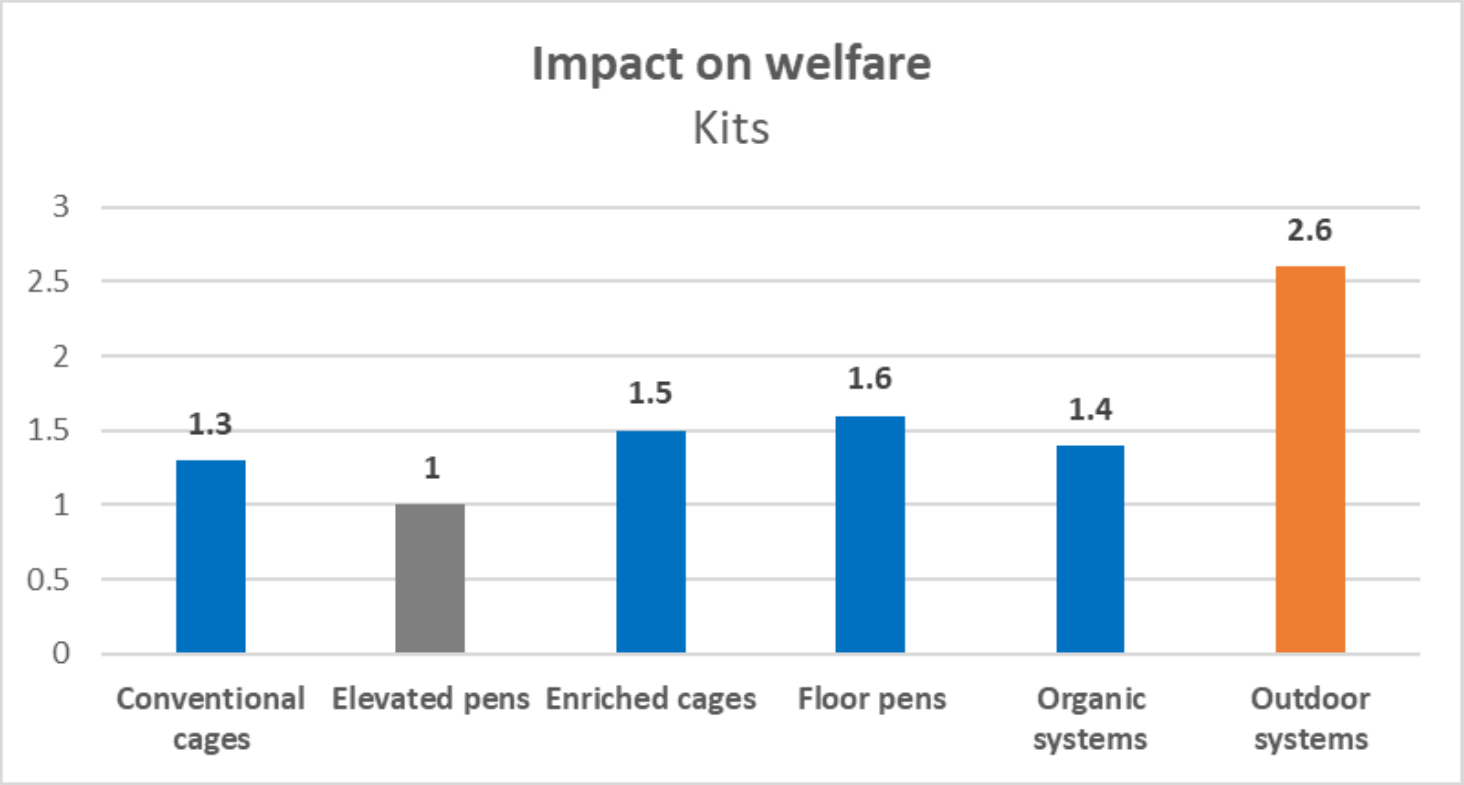
CONVENTIONAL CAGES

- **Restriction of movement**
- Inability to express gnawing behaviour
- Resting problem
- **Inability to express positive social behaviour**
- Prolonged hunger

Recommendations about conventional cages for growing rabbits:

- Resting problems and restriction of movement to be prevented by reducing stocking density

Comparison of welfare in 6 housing systems: kits



CONCLUSION:

The welfare of kits is lower in outdoor systems and higher in the elevated pens.

Comparison of welfare in 6 housing systems: kits

MAIN WELFARE CONSEQUENCES

OUTDOOR SYSTEMS

- **Heat stress**
- Prolonged hunger
- Neonatal disorders
- **Cold stress**
- Gastrointestinal disorders

Recommendations about outdoor systems for kits

- For heat stress, use supplementary heaters or fans, apply correct management of the nest.
- Gastrointestinal disorders prevented by balanced diet and appropriate weaning age.

Main outcomes for organic production

Main welfare consequences (does)
Restriction of movement (if limited access to outdoor)
Heat stress
Reproductive disorders
Resting Problem
Skin lesions

CONCLUSION

Diversity of systems (EC Regulation 848/2018): difficult to make an overall assessment

Welfare scores obtained from the experts suggest welfare is generally good

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reduce restriction of movement by enlarging the sheltered part of the housing
- Reduce heat and cold stress by insulating shelters or adding shade in the outdoor area
- improving management of housing hygiene, feeding strategy and daily checking of the animals
- Minimise fear in growing rabbits by use of proper electrified fencing or net top protection against predators

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Back-up slides

Comparison of welfare in 6 housing systems: growing rabbits

MAIN WELFARE CONSEQUENCES

ELEVATED PENS

- **Skin disorders**
- Resting problem
- Inability to express gnawing behaviour
- Fear

Recommendations about elevated pens:

- Skin disorders are avoided by proper biosecurity, climate control and positioning of the drinkers so that wetting of the fur is prevented
- Gastrointestinal disorders minimized by balanced diet
- Fear reduced by avoiding rough handling

Comparison of welfare in 6 housing systems: kits

ELEVATED PENS

MAIN WELFARE CONSEQUENCES

- Inability to express gnawing behaviour
- Prolonged hunger
- Neonatal disorders
- Fear
- **Skin disorders**

Recommendations about elevated pens

- Provide suitable gnawing materials for kits
- Fearfulness reduced by avoiding rough handling and situations leading to aggression in does.
- Correct design of the nest box to only allow kits access to the main cage when sufficiently mature.