

To Garden Route SPCA; Mossel Bay

RE: VISIT TO SOUTHERN CAPE BUNNY HAVEN

On the 19th of March 2025, I, along with Inspector Mariaan Wentzel of the Garden Route SPCA in Mossel Bay, visited a rabbit rehabilitation and rescue center in Albertinia. During our visit, we engaged with the owner, Monique Goosen, regarding the care and welfare of the rabbits at the center. The owner stated that the Southern Cape Bunny Haven (SCBH) is both registered and specialized in the care of disabled and specialized bunnies. She further mentioned that the Haven also rescues rabbits from the streets, often taking in those that have been abandoned.

Upon entering the house, a strong smell of ammonia and faeces was immediately noticeable. During our visit, we observed approximately 360 rabbits, as claimed by the owner. These rabbits were housed in crates and enclosures, located throughout the owner's home, including the living room, kitchen, bathroom, hallway, and two spare rooms. We were not permitted to enter the owner's personal bedroom or bathroom.

In my professional opinion, the crates, cages, and enclosures significantly encroach upon the owner's living space, as they occupy not only the living room but also both the kitchen and bathroom areas (see images 6-11). Many of the crates and enclosures are either placed directly on the floor or stacked on top of one another, with some gates left open. The house lacks sufficient ventilation, with the only airflow coming from a small fan in the corner of the living room. All windows in the house are closed, contributing to a stuffy and excessively warm environment throughout. Additionally, the house experiences a noticeable lack of natural sunlight. The owner claims to cool the rooms by hanging dampened towels throughout the house, but in my professional opinion, this method is likely to increase humidity rather than provide effective cooling.

The owner described the rabbits as varying in type, with some having suffered and then recovered from neurological conditions such as Encephalitozoonosis (caused by *Encephalitozoon cuniculi*) and/or toxoplasmosis. Additionally, some rabbits were paraplegic, with a few having only three legs, while others reportedly experienced severe anxiety, among other issues. The owner claims that all these rabbits have been

evaluated/treated by Dr Susie Kok, however physical or digital evidence of medical treatment or procedures was not provided.

Upon observation, many of the rabbits appeared to be afflicted with torticollis (head tilt), or seizures and/or cancer. One rabbit, in particular, exhibited signs of lethargy, torticollis, and a prolonged period of recumbency during the approximate two-hour visit (see image 2).

Regarding the record-keeping of the rabbits' welfare, no written documentation was provided, including feeding and watering schedules, or records for taking the rabbits outside. Additionally, no faeces were observed on the grass outside. The owner claims that the rabbits are taken into the yard in the evenings for approximately 45 minutes. However, some rabbits are reportedly never taken outside, as the owner asserts that they prefer staying indoors.

Many of the rabbits exhibited signs of severe anxiety, particularly foot stomping. The owner attributed this anxiety to past trauma. However, in my professional opinion, the high stocking density, excessively warm environment, and strong smell of ammonia are significant contributing factors to the stress and anxiety these rabbits are experiencing, which may be exacerbating any pre-existing conditions.

Recommendations for Improving the Welfare of the Rabbits and Conditions of the House:

1. Improve Ventilation:

- To reduce the risk of respiratory issues for both rabbits and humans, it is crucial to enhance ventilation within the house. Increased airflow will help mitigate the build-up of ammonia and other harmful gases, ensuring a healthier environment.
- Consider installing additional fans or an air filtration system in key areas housing the rabbits to promote better air circulation.
- Open windows or install window vents to allow for natural airflow, which will help reduce the warm, stuffy atmosphere and improve the overall air quality in the home.

2. Increase Natural Sunlight:

- Provide better access to natural sunlight in the spaces where the rabbits are housed. Sunlight is essential for the health and well-being of both humans and animals, helping to regulate circadian rhythms and reduce stress.
- If natural sunlight exposure is limited, consider installing full-spectrum lighting to improve living conditions for the rabbits, offering a more natural light cycle and promoting their health.

3. Reduce Overcrowding and High Stocking Density:

- The current high stocking density of approximately 360 rabbits in a confined indoor space poses significant health risks for both the rabbits and humans. Overcrowding contributes to increased stress, behavioural issues, and the rapid spread of infectious diseases such as respiratory infections, gastrointestinal problems, and parasitic infestations.
- To mitigate these risks, it is important to reduce the number of rabbits housed indoors. This could be achieved by relocating some rabbits to a

dedicated facility or expanding the living space to provide a more manageable population based on available resources.

- It is crucial to ensure that the number of rabbits per enclosure is reduced to provide each rabbit with enough space to move freely and receive individual care. This will help alleviate stress and ensure the overall well-being of the rabbits.
- The recommended stocking density for rabbits in a rehabilitation (rehab) or shelter-type facility depends on several factors including:
 1. The **age, size, and breed** of the rabbits
 2. Whether they are **housed indoors or outdoors**
 3. The **purpose** (e.g., temporary holding, long-term care, breeding, or recovery)
 4. Their **behavioral needs**, especially related to space for movement and social interaction – It is important that the rabbits have separate areas for eating, toileting and resting.

According to guidelines provided by the RSPCA and UK DEFRA, a minimum of **2 m² of enclosure space per rabbit**, along with an **additional run area of at least 2 m²**, is recommended—resulting in a total of **4 m² per rabbit** for domestic or semi-permanent housing. These standards emphasize not only the provision of adequate space but also the importance of **environmental enrichment** and opportunities for rabbits to express **natural behaviours**.

In group housing situations, it is essential to ensure that enclosures offer **sufficient space and appropriate hiding areas** to allow animals to retreat, thereby reducing the risk of **aggression and stress**. Therefore, **minimum 0.5–0.6 m² per rabbit, ideally 1 m² or more** if space allows.

At present, the most practical course of action would be to reduce the number of rabbits housed in this facility by half, bringing the population down to approximately **150–180 rabbits**.

Should overcrowding and welfare concerns persist despite this reduction, a **further decrease in numbers** will be necessary to ensure compliance with acceptable animal welfare standards and to promote the health and well-being of the animals.

4. **Separate Living and Animal Housing Areas:**

- To protect both the rabbits' and the owner's well-being, it is recommended to separate the rabbits' living areas from personal living spaces such as bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens. This separation will reduce the risk of zoonotic diseases, improve hygiene, and create a more suitable environment for both humans and animals.
- Establishing a dedicated indoor space or relocating the enclosures to a designated area outside the home will reduce stress on both the rabbits and the owner.

5. **Proper Record-Keeping:**

- It is essential to implement proper record-keeping for the rabbits' welfare. This should include documented feeding and watering schedules, health monitoring, and records of veterinary visits or treatments.

- A log system should also track when the rabbits are taken outside, ensuring that all rabbits receive adequate outdoor time for exercise and enrichment.
- 6. Enhance Hygiene and Cleanliness:**
- Regular cleaning and disinfection of living spaces are crucial to preventing disease transmission. The strong smell of ammonia and accumulation of faeces in the environment indicate poor hygiene, which can contribute to respiratory and gastrointestinal infections in rabbits.
 - Bedding and litter should be changed frequently, and enclosures should be sanitized regularly to prevent the build-up of bacteria, parasites, and mold.
- 7. Provide Adequate Outdoor Time:**
- It is essential to provide all rabbits with adequate outdoor time to promote exercise, natural behaviours', and mental stimulation. The owner should ensure that all rabbits are regularly taken outside for fresh air, and create a safe, enclosed outdoor space for them to roam freely.
 - For rabbits that prefer staying indoors, create a comfortable and enriched environment within their enclosures to allow for natural movement and reduce stress.
- 8. Reduce Stress Factors:**
- High stocking density, excessive warmth, and poor ventilation contribute significantly to stress and anxiety in rabbits. To alleviate these stressors, the number of rabbits per enclosure should be reduced, and the environment should be optimized for better comfort.
 - Consider placing fewer rabbits in each enclosure and ensuring that each rabbit has enough space to move freely. Providing hiding spaces or safe zones within enclosures can help alleviate anxiety by giving rabbits a retreat when they need quiet time.
 - Evaluate the current practice of using dampened towels to cool the house. This method may not effectively reduce the temperature or humidity, so alternative cooling systems, such as air conditioning or fans, should be considered for temperature regulation.

Health Concerns Associated with High Stocking Density:

- 1. Disease Spread Among Rabbits:**
- High stocking density in a confined space significantly increases the risk of disease outbreaks, including respiratory infections, gastrointestinal issues, and parasitic infestations. When rabbits are housed in close quarters, diseases can spread rapidly through direct contact, contaminated bedding, or shared water and food sources. Overcrowding makes it harder to monitor individual rabbit health, leading to delayed diagnosis and treatment.
- 2. Zoonotic Diseases:**
- Overcrowding and poor ventilation can also create an environment conducive to the spread of zoonotic diseases (those that can be transmitted from animals to humans), such as Toxoplasmosis, Salmonella, and Lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV). The high concentration

of rabbits increases interactions between humans and rabbits, making it difficult to maintain proper sanitation and hygiene.

Encephalitozoonosis as a Potential Zoonosis:

Encephalitozoonosis is an infectious disease caused by the protozoan parasite *Encephalitozoon cuniculi*. While it primarily affects rabbits, it can also infect other animals, including rodents and humans. *Encephalitozoon cuniculi* is considered a potential zoonotic agent, meaning it can be transmitted from animals to humans, although human infections are relatively rare.

- **Transmission to Humans:**
 - *Encephalitozoon cuniculi* is primarily spread through urine. Humans can become infected by coming into contact with infected urine, feces, bedding, or contaminated surfaces. The parasite's spores are shed in the urine of infected rabbits, and humans can be exposed when handling contaminated bedding, enclosures, or directly interacting with infected rabbits.
- **Health Risks for Humans:**
 - In humans, *E. cuniculi* can cause mild to severe symptoms, particularly in individuals with weakened immune systems. Potential health risks include:
 - Flu-like symptoms (fever, fatigue, and chills)
 - Eye infections (uveitis or other eye conditions)
 - Neurological symptoms (headaches, confusion, and seizures)
 - While infections in healthy individuals are less common and typically less severe, there is still a risk, particularly for immunocompromised individuals.
- **Preventing EC Transmission in the Home:**
 - One of the most effective measures to reduce the risk of *Encephalitozoon cuniculi* transmission is to **avoid housing rabbits in the kitchen**, where food is prepared and consumed. The kitchen is a high-risk area for contamination due to the potential for rabbit urine or feces to come into contact with food preparation surfaces. Contaminated food could lead to infection.
 - By housing rabbits in separate, dedicated animal spaces, such as a designated rabbit room or outdoor enclosures, you can significantly reduce the risk of zoonotic transmission. Ensuring that rabbits are kept out of food preparation areas will help prevent accidental contamination and reduce the risk of exposure to *E. cuniculi*.

Veterinary Oversight and Inspections:

- It is highly recommended that a qualified veterinarian conducts regular inspections of the facilities at least **twice a year**. Regular veterinary visits will help ensure that the health and welfare of the rabbits are continuously monitored and that any emerging health or welfare concerns are addressed promptly.

- A veterinary professional can assess the overall living conditions, monitor for potential signs of disease or distress, and offer guidance on improving care practices and preventive measures. These inspections will help ensure the long-term health and well-being of the rabbits and minimize the risks associated with overcrowding and inadequate care.

Based on our observations, we have identified significant animal health concerns related to the statements above. It is in the best interest of the animals' welfare that the recommendations provided be followed. Additionally, we strongly encourage the establishment of clear communication and collaboration with the SPCA, enabling both parties to work together effectively to ensure the health and well-being of these rabbits.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Taaibah Rahman
CCS State Veterinarian George
Phone number: +27 83 797 0010
Email: SVGeorge@westerncape.gov.za

Please see attached images below:



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6



Image 7



Image 8

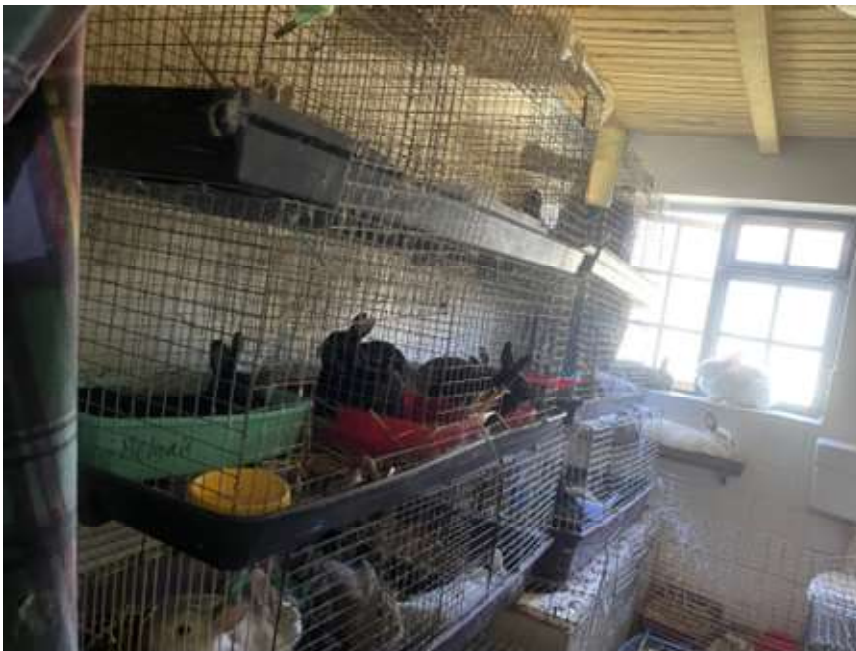


Image 9



Image 10



Image 11



Image 12



Image 13



Image 14



Image 15



Image 16