Raising Rabbits for Market Projects
A Guide for a Successful Rabbit Market Project

What is a Rabbit Market Project? What does it take to have a successful Rabbit Market Project? What do I feed a Market Project rabbit? What is a Meat Pen? Single Fryer? Roaster? How are Meat Pens judged? What is the age for Market Project rabbits?
So many questions about rabbit market projects. Let's try to answer a few of them!

SELECTING YOUR STOCK
Careful consideration should be given to the breed, and quality of your stock to ensure a successful Market Project. Selecting your stock from a commercial rabbit breed will ensure your rabbits are at a sufficient weight for their age (see below) at the time of exhibition. Any other breeds will struggle to make weight or have the appropriate 'type' for a market project.
For best chances of having a good meat pen it is best to find a buck and two does to start out with.

TIMELINE
Plan breeding your meat pen doe and buck at 100 days before your event, either a specific show, or Fair.
32 days gestation + 68 days to grow out to size
Once your doe is bred, house her in the cage that you plan to have her kindle in. This will reduce stress related deaths of the kits from a doe in an unfamiliar cage.

Calculator:
Newaygo County Fair check-in is August 6, 2022.

32 days gestation + 68 days to grow = _April 26, 2022_ is the target Calendar date to breed. The latest you should go is April 30, 2022.

On a calendar, count back 100 days from August 6. Record your breeding date, date for the nest box, and kindling date.

Prepare and place your nest boxes with the doe approximately 1 week before the doe is due to kindle. Too early and she will likely use the nest box as a litter box. If you wait too late she may kindle early and give birth to kits on the bare wire. In this situation the kits have a slim chance of survival. Nest boxes need nesting material to help the doe keep her kits warm. Options to use are clean, dust and mold free wheat straw, pine (not cedar) shavings, grass clippings, hay, or compressed pine bedding pellets, or layers of the listed materials.

KINDLING
Once your doe(s) kindles look inside to see if there are any dead kits. Remove any dead kits immediately. Count and record how many kits total, dead and alive.
Make sure your doe has pulled enough hair to keep the kits warm. If not, add more hay/stray, or other bedding material.
Check on the kits around 1 week old to see if any have died. Remove any dead kits.

Around 10 days watch for the kits eyes opening. Look for any kits with encrusted 'nest box' eyes. Use a warm wet cloth to gently loosen, then remove any encrusted material from the eyes. Do this daily until the eye is clear. If the eye doesn't clear up, use Terramycin for clearing up the eye. This is available at most local farm supply stores.

FEEDING PROGRAM

Start your doe, or transition your doe, to a pellet feed that is high in protein - 17% or greater - at least a week before you plan to breed her. Her normal amount of pellets is sufficient to maintain good condition, but not allow her to get fat. Once your doe kindles, wait a day or two before increasing the amount of pellets to an unlimited (as much as she wants to eat) amount. If your doe's feeder is empty, fill it up. If the feeder is not empty do not add the same amount that you added at the last chore time. You do not want the pellets to get stale in the feeder. Rabbits will not eat stale pellets. Your doe should always have food in front of her to make enough nutritious milk to support healthy growing kits. Before the kits come out of the nest box, offer them soft hay to nibble on to ease their transition from a milk diet to a vegetarian diet (hay/pellets). The amount of pellets consumed by the rabbits will increase once the kits begin to come out of the nest box.

LEAVING THE NEST BOX

Kits will begin to leave the nest box between two and three weeks of age. At this point they are independently mobile and have full sight. Once you notice the kits no longer going in the nest box, or the nest box is soiled, remove the nest box from the cage. Give the doe and kits something to rest on, either a resting mat, board, or hay/straw to offer as a place to get off the wire floor. Remove any soiled hay or straw when it's necessary, and/or clean resting mats and boards as needed.

WEIGHING AND SELECTING YOUR RABBITS

Record keeping is important when monitoring your kit's growth. This will help you when selecting the kits for the market classes (see below) and when selecting any kits for herd replacements (when their parents retire from breeding). Start looking at your kits around 4 weeks for any disqualifying features for your breed standard (color, markings, wrong number of toes, broken tail, etc). A DISQUALIFICATION OF ONE RABBIT WILL DISQUALIFY AN ENTIRE MEAT PEN! Identify the kits with a number or symbol in the ear (as an example) or tattoo your kits for permanent identification. Around 6 weeks begin to look at the kit's body type and weight. Record which kits are best matched in weight and type to prepare for the class. Another benefit is to begin handling the kits at this young age to get them ready for the show.

Around 8 weeks old you should have narrowed the kits down in each litter for which ones will be selected for their classes (see below). Try choosing your meat pen kits from the same litter, but this is not a requirement. Continue to monitor and record the weights and body types each week. If you haven't tattooed the rabbits ears yet this is the time to do so.

EXHIBITING YOUR MARKET RABBITS

Watch for the deadline for the Fair entry. Make sure you have time to get all your entries and project records turned in. Keep your rabbit(s) as clean as possible. Use separate 'holes' in your travel cages so they do not soil each other, or fight. Use stain remover and a baby wipe if their fur needs cleaning. Trim their toenails (be extra careful with kit nails) so they are not sharp points (both you and your judge will be thankful). Smile and have fun!

MEAT PEN OF THREE -
Age and weight to follow both the Fryer and Roaster requirement.
Judged for uniformity of the group.
Judged by the Commercial Rabbit Standard (see website for Commercial Rabbit Standard)
Meat pen rabbits consist of three rabbits, all of the same breed (or cross) and variety (color/pattern). Meat Pen rabbits do not necessarily need to come from the same litter.

POINT SCHEDULE FOR JUDGING MEAT PENS

Meat Type	40 points
Condition of flesh	30 points
Uniformity of body and weight	20 points
Fur	10 points
TOTAL	100 points

SINGLE FRYER - no older than 12 weeks old. Weight ranges from 3.5 to 5.5 lbs. Judged as a single rabbit against other single fryers only.

POINT SCHEDULE FOR JUDGING SINGLE FRYERS

Meat Type	50 points
Condition of flesh	40 points
Fur	10 points
TOTAL	100 points

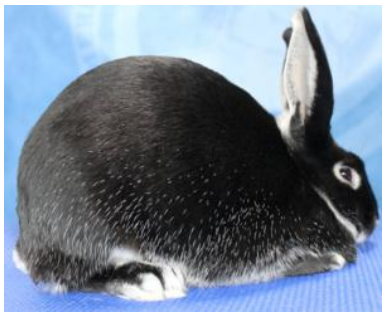
ROASTER - no older than 6 months old. Minimum weight is 5.5 lbs, maximum weight is 9 lbs.

POINT SCHEDULE FOR JUDGING ROASTERS

Meat Type	50 points
Condition of flesh	40 points
Fur	10 points
TOTAL	100 points

WHAT ARE BREEDS MOST SUITABLE FOR A MEAT PEN?
The most suitable rabbits are those from the Commercial type breed - those that are approximately 5.5 lbs at 10 weeks of age.

American Sable	Argente Brun	Blanc de Hotot

Californian	Champagne D'Argent	Chinchilla, American
Cinnamon	Creme D'Argent	New Zealand (all varieties)
Palomino	Rex (all varieties)	Satin (all varieties)
Silver Fox (all varieties)	Silver Marten	
		

Credit to American Rabbit Breeders Association website for rabbit breed photos, ARBA Standard of Perfection, and Howe's Rabbitry, Raising Meat Pens for the information here.