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Evaluation of tropical forages as feeds for growing in rabbits

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Introduction

In developing countries, the vast majority of meat rabbits are produced in small scale or backyard systems. It is in such systems that the rabbits can make a valuable contribution towards supplying meat for the poorer urban and rural people.

There are many good reasons for rabbit production: rabbit production as an alternative livestock species, rabbit production as a means of utilising small rural holdings in a profitable manner and rabbit production as a more efficient means of converting low quality feed ingredients into meat for human consumption. Rabbit production can also be a family hobby for semi-rural and urban families and at the same time give the families a supply of very nutritious meat, with all amino acids for human requirements, that is low in cholesterol and high in Omega-3 fatty acids (McCroskey, 2000).

Rabbits have a potential as meat-producing animals in the tropics, particularly on subsistence-type small farms. Such characteristics as small body size (thus low daily feed requirements), short generation interval, high reproductive potential, rapid growth rate and the ability to utilise forages and fibrous agricultural by-products are attributes in favour of rabbit production (Cheeke, 1986). Although rabbits, like many other traditional farm animals, are more suited to cooler climates, however, there are possibilities to raise rabbits also in hot climates.

Raising rabbits on a small scale in an urban environment can provide a means of converting garden and other food wastes into a high quality protein for the family, while also providing excellent manure for the garden, which can be used directly without composting. Cut grass, weeds, hay, straw, surplus or damaged vegetables and fruits, stale bread, and almost any other unspoiled food waste (except for coffee grounds) can be fed to rabbits (Surrey, 1997).