



Regulations for Specific Products

Selling Rabbit Meat

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There is a small but growing interest in raising and selling meat rabbits in Washington. With the proper license or permit, a producer can sell his or her rabbit meat in Washington State to retail outlets such as restaurants, grocery stores, and farmers markets, wholesale, or straight from the farm. Currently, restaurants featuring locally sourced foods or French or European fare are potential markets for rabbit meat. To sell and process rabbit, producers must have a WSDA Food Processor license. In 2013, there were nine licensed rabbit processing facilities in Washington. This fact sheet includes:

- Processing in existing WSDA licensed food processing facilities;
- How to get the WSDA food processor license;
- Health Department requirements for selling rabbit meat; and
- Helpful resources on rabbit processing.

Processing in Existing WSDA licensed Food Processing Facilities

Rabbit may be processed in existing WSDA licensed Food Processing Facilities if adequate time and separation is demonstrated. Contact the WSDA and add “rabbit” to the list of products processed on the facility’s license. Please contact your food safety inspector before making any changes to your facility or starting to process rabbit. This will help ensure that you are in full compliance with the food safety regulations for processing and labeling.

A WSDA licensed food processing facility can process rabbits for other producers. The food industry term for this is “co-packer”. This co-packer may carry insurance, and usually charges per unit. Labeling on these products must include the words: “Manufactured for...” or “Distributed by...” to designate the firm’s relation to the product.

A “pass-through” window is used in many WSDA poultry processing facilities. This is where the slaughter occurs outside the processing facility and the carcass is passed through a window into the facility for processing. The “pass-through” window may not be required for rabbit if a sanitary means of getting the slaughtered rabbit into the facility can be demonstrated. For example, there could be a scenario in which slaughtered rabbits are plunged into an ice bath and then transported into the facility all at once. As always, we strongly advise you to contact your food safety inspector before you finalize the design of your food processing facility and start investing in equipment and materials.

For additional information about the processing facility, please see the fact sheet “Selling and Processing Poultry” and “WSDA Food Processor License and Facilities.”

How to Get the WSDA Food Processor License

To process rabbits in your own facility, producers need a WSDA Food Processing License. We strongly advise you to contact the WSDA Food Safety Program to discuss your plans. The WSDA Food Safety Program is available for one-on-one technical assistance with the licensing process, including creating a processing facility design and advising on construction materials, equipment, cooling procedures, water source, and food safety techniques to prevent cross-contamination of meat products.

To get the WSDA Food Processor License, you will need to submit an application to the WSDA Food Safety Program. It is available online at www.agr.wa.gov/FoodAnimal/FoodProcessors or by calling (360) 902-1876 or by emailing foodsafety@agr.wa.gov. The Food Processor License application includes a sanitation schedule, intended type of process (#12 is rabbit butchering), ingredient/processing information, a floor plan of where you will be processing rabbit, proposed labeling, questions about your water supply and testing. Allow plenty of time for getting your water system approved for your facility, as this can take weeks and/or months. The WSDA Food Processor License fee is based on your projected sales volume. It starts at \$55 per year for gross sales up to \$50,000.

Health Department Requirements for Selling Rabbit Meat

All producers who are direct marketing rabbit meat will need to find out what permits are required by the local health jurisdiction where they will be selling rabbit meat. So, if you are selling in Seattle, you will need to check with Seattle-King County Public Health; in Tacoma, it is Tacoma-Pierce County Public Health. In most other areas, the local jurisdiction will be the County Health Department. In Spokane, it is the Spokane Regional Health District. In all, there are 37 local health jurisdictions in Washington: www.doh.wa.gov/AboutUs/PublicHealthSystem/LocalHealthJurisdictions.aspx

While all local health jurisdictions adopt the same “Washington State Retail Food Code,” how the permitting structure, fees and inspections are set up vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In addition, the local health jurisdiction may add requirements beyond the Retail Food Code. Typically, the food permits are in the Environmental Health division of the Health Department.

Farmers Markets

In general, the Retail Food Code considers farmers markets to be a “Temporary Food Establishment.” The local health jurisdiction permits and inspects farmers markets. In turn, farmers markets require that rabbit meat vendors have the WSDA Food Processor License and all local permits needed in that county.

Producers should check with the farmers market manager and health department early on to find out what is required. Questions to ask your local health jurisdiction include:

- What permit(s) are required for producers to sell rabbit meat at farmers market. Are fresh rabbit meat sales allowed? Or does all rabbit meat need to be frozen?
- What temperature needs to be maintained?
- Can producers use coolers or is mechanical refrigeration required? If refrigeration or a freezer is needed, be sure to ask the market manager about the electricity and voltage available at the market site.

- Is a separate permit required for each market site or each day?
- How much does the permit cost?
- When are permits due?

Helpful Resources on Rabbit Processing

The National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service (www.attra.ncat.org) and Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (www.nichemeatprocessing.org) are excellent resources for learning more about raising, processing and selling rabbit meat.

Recommended Fact Sheets

- 19. WSDA Food Processor License and Facilities
- 35. Selling and Processing Poultry

For further information, to provide comments, or suggest a resource to add to this fact sheet, please email smallfarms@agr.wa.gov or call (360) 902-2888.