

## AIR TRANSFER OF DAY-OLD RABBITS INTO TRINIDAD (WEST INDIES)

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The island countries of the Caribbean generally have rather small animal populations. This is particularly true for rabbits. For example, the author has estimated that there are less than four thousand rabbits in Trinidad. Furthermore, sources of breeding stock of superior genetic potential are very limited - the small rabbitry at the University of the West Indies, is one such source. There is a problem though in that farmers keep returning to the same source for renewal of their breeding stock because of the ease of approachability, communication and availability of stock. This soon gives rise to problems of inbreeding, high morbidity and mortality. Often, farmers then lay the blame on the rabbits themselves and the source of supply.

The above points to the necessity of breeding stock renewal through imports of superior germplasm - the question is from where? Caribbean islands are generally free from any infectious diseases of rabbits. This excludes Europe and the whole of the Americas as sources of supply. So, we looked nearer to us and Guadeloupe (French West Indies) appeared as a good supply source. We were aware that Guadeloupe often received breeding stock from mainland France and that the genetic potential of their rabbits was superior to ours.

The air transport of one-day-old rabbits is common practice across Europe (LEBAS, 1998). DAVID (1991) reported on air transport of 96 day-old rabbits from France to USA. More recently, KPODEKON *et al.* (1996) reported on air transfer of 80 day-old rabbits from France to Benin. However, this practice is unknown in most other countries. It is for this reason that we wish to record the air transfer of one-day-old rabbits from Guadeloupe to Trinidad for the benefit of WRS readers in the Caribbean who wish to employ this mode of transport to import new germplasm. The points of interest regarding this mode of transport are reduction in shipping time, transfer cost and spread of infectious diseases.

On January 16, 1998, five (two males) one-day-old rabbits left Guadeloupe on an 8hr-long air trip to Trinidad. The kits were accompanied by all necessary veterinary health certificates and were found in excellent condition on arrival in Trinidad. Two hours after arrival at the airport, the kits were fostered on to the two adoptive mothers. In this particular instance, the kits were brought in as hand luggage in a small cardboard box with air-vents on its sides and lined with sterilised cotton wool. The box was left unsealed to allow visual custom inspection and to avoid x-raying.

The two adoptive mothers were in their third parity and were synchronised four weeks earlier so as to kindle on or just before the date of arrival of imported kits. The adopted kits were allowed to nurse immediately on arrival but nursing was limited to once per day between 07:00 and 08:00hr, thereafter. No rejections were observed. During weaning at 28 days of age, all kits were in good health. In fact, there was no mortality from arrival to 24 weeks of age when their average body weight was 2.8 kg. Fatteners were fed fixed quantity of pig grower pellets (16% CP) and wilted grass *ad libitum*. The average growth rate of imported kits/fryers was comparable to local rabbits (2-28 d = 15.8 g/d; 4-12 wks = 22.9 g/d; 12-18 wks = 20.8 g/d; 18-24 wks = 6.6 g/d). The postweaning feed efficiency (concentrate/gain) was also comparable (= 2.96)

While most airlines may refuse transport of day-old kits in the passenger cabin, we believe that it should still be possible to make small shipments (10-20 kits), properly packaged and accompanied with necessary veterinary certificates, in a fashion similar to that used in importing vaccines or blood samples etc., as accompanying cargo. Moreover, it should be quite possible to employ special courier service. There is need to lobby for change in the attitude of airlines to such shipments.

We hope that this report can serve to stimulate rabbit germplasm exchange between countries separated by up to 20 hours of ground and air transportation.

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**RESUME : Transport aérien de lapereaux d'un jour vers Trinidad (Caraïbes).** Cinq lapereaux d'un jour ont été transportés par avion du Département français de la Guadeloupe (Petites Antilles) à Trinidad. Le transport a duré 7 heures. Deux heures après leur arrivée, ils ont été adoptés par 2 lapines dont la mise bas avait été synchronisée avec celle des mères génétiques. Les lapereaux ont été sevrés à 28 jours et aucune perte n'a été déplorée jusqu'à l'âge de 24 semaines et un poids moyen de 2,8 kg. Le problème de la législation du transport est évoqué