



FALL DORMANCY – FACT OR FICTION

*By Dave A. Mangione
The Ohio State University*

Cooler temperatures and shorter days signal the beginning of fall. Raising and conditioning rabbits this time of year can be very frustrating. The following questions invariably come up this time of year.

Why do my junior age rabbits come into fur so much easier than my 6-8's or seniors? Why are my does less receptive and my conception rates low? Why is it that when I breed my doe's 10 days to two weeks ahead of the convention, they do not finish in coat as they do in the spring? How is it that my fall litters are not nearly as good as my spring litters?

The answers to these questions in part or to a great extent have to do with the fall dormancy period which is directly correlated to decreasing daylight. This is the time of year when Mother Nature says "Time To Rest"! The fall dormancy period is triggered by decreasing daylight or shorter days. Rabbits on a daily basis require about 12 to 14 hours of light. The shortening of our days, signals our rabbits to go into a resting period to prepare for winter. Examples of this preparation include; molting, decrease in hormone levels (estrogen and testosterone), decreased libido and conception, lower milk production and lower quality eggs shed for fertilization.

So why do my junior age rabbits perform so well in the fall? Just like teenagers, junior age rabbits have surging hormones. Their high levels of estrogen and testosterone are critical for proper growth and conditioning. This surge lasts up to about six months of age. Take some time and observe in your own rabbitry, once juniors reach six months of age in the fall of the year they will go into a molt. Rabbits tend to hold their prime beyond six months of age in the spring, because of increased daylight hours.

What does all this mean for us as breeders? A breeder should position their breeding program to have a high percentage of junior age rabbits for their fall show string. If you look back over several years of fall convention results, 90 % of the BOB winners in the New Zealand show have been junior age rabbits. When a 6-8 month old rabbit has won, it invariably was a true junior age rabbit.

So if you are looking to fool Mother Nature and increase your odds of winning a major fall show, junior age rabbits are your best bet. No doubt, fall dormancy is FACT not FICTION. Understanding what is occurring during this time of year will allow you to better position your breeding program for success this fall.