**Rabbit Husbandry and Care**

Last Review Date: May 7, 2024

**I. Purpose**

The purpose of this standard operating procedure (SOP) is to outline the animal care requirements associated with the daily husbandry of rabbits to ensure consistent and uniform care.

**II. Responsibility**

This procedure applies to all personnel involved in the care of rabbits in the Laboratory Animal Resources (LAR) facility on the campus of the University of Montana.

**III. Policy**

It is LAR policy to meet or exceed all federal, state, and local regulations and guidelines and to comply with all institutional policies and procedures as they apply to the use of animals in research. Personnel must attend any applicable training in animal care and use, occupational health and safety, equipment operation, and SOPs prior to performing activities outlined in this SOP or work under the direct supervision of a trained LAR staff member.

**IV. Definitions**

* Alopecia – hair loss
* Ptyalism – drooling
* Anorexia – a condition in which the animal is not eating
* Potable – suitable for drinking

**V. Procedures**

* Each morning, a staff member is to observe all rabbits for signs of illness, injury or death and to check their cage pans for signs of abnormal bodily secretions. Clinical signs observed may include: alopecia, diarrhea, ptyalism, anorexia, weight loss, nasal discharge, ocular discharge, head tilt and/or shaking of the head, and changes in behavior or mannerisms.
* If a health problem is detected, identify the animal’s cage with a yellow vet check card signifying the need for veterinary attention. Alert the supervisor and/or the Attending Veterinarian (AV).
* If a death is detected, put the rabbit in a trash bag, seal, label, and put the body in the freezer in Health Sciences Building (HSB) room 015A. If the rabbit’s cage has a biohazard sticker, double-bag the body, label as a biohazard, mist the outside of the bag with Peroxigard RTU, and place in the freezer in HSB 015A. Alert the supervisor and/or the AV.

**VI. Identification**

* Each rabbit is identified by ear tattoo.

**VII. Husbandry**

**Husbandry: Individually housed in caging (daily)**

* Rabbits are fed four (4) ounces of Inotiv 8630 Rabbit Diet at the beginning of each workday. A handful of timothy hay (purchased on Amazon) should be fed for enrichment and fiber.
* Feed barrels are to be labeled with feed type, milling date, and expiration date.
* Check feeders daily. Push the remaining food down into the feeder so that the food level rises even with the feeder edge on the inside of the cage. Feeders are to be filled with feed.
* Rabbits are to have free access to clean potable water at all times. Water bottles are to be checked twice daily. Refill if the bottle is less than ½ full.
* Pull and replace cage pans three times per week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) or if the pan contents appear urine-soaked or there is an excess accumulation of hair or feces.
* Each rabbit is to have some form of enrichment device in its cage at all times unless otherwise specified by the research protocol.

**Husbandry: Individually housed in caging (bimonthly)**

* A complete cage change is performed every two weeks (rack, feeders, enrichment  
  devices, water bottles).
* Transfer rabbits to clean cages along with their individual cage card.
* Enrichment devices are to be exchanged so that each rabbit is given a device that is different from the previous one. Enrichment is kept in the clean cage wash room (HSB 007, “Storage”). Enrichment devices are to be checked routinely for sharp edges, burrs, cracks in the plastic, etc. Discard any items that may be a potential safety hazard to the animal.
* All dirty equipment is taken directly to the dirty side of the cage wash room (Health Sciences Building 012) for sanitizing. Do not leave soiled caging in corridors.

**Husbandry: Group housing in pens (daily)**

* Rabbits are housed in 7.5' by 6' (total 45 square feet) pens. Each pen can hold 15 rabbits weighing less than 4 kg, or 11 rabbits weighing 4-5 kg.
* Feed each rabbit *ad* *libutum*Inotiv 8630 Rabbit Diet. A handful of timothy hay should be fed for enrichment and fiber.
* Label feed barrels with feed type, milling date and expiration date.
* Check feeders daily. Push the remaining food down into the feeder so that the food level rises even with the feeder edge on the inside of the cage. Feeders should be filled full with feed.
* Rabbits must have free access to clean potable water at all times. Check water bottles daily. Refill if bottle is less than 1/2 full.
* On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, pull and replace cage pans, wipe down walls and mop pen floor using Peroxigard.
* On Tuesday, Thursday, and weekends, scoop dirty bedding out of pans and sanitize pans with Peroxigard RTU. Replace with clean bedding, wipe down walls and mop pen floor.
* Enrichment devices are available in the pen at all times unless otherwise specified by the research protocol. Clean enrichment is stored in the clean cage storage room in HSB.

**Husbandry: Group housing in pens (bimonthly)**

* A complete pen change is performed every other Monday (pans, houses, water bottles, feeders and enrichment devices)
* Enrichment devices should be checked routinely for sharp edges, burrs, cracks in the plastic, etc. Discard any item that may be a potential hazard to the animals.
* Take all dirty equipment directly to the dirty side of the cage wash room (HSB 012) for sanitizing. Do not leave soiled caging in corridors.

**VIII. Sanitation**

* Ledges, fixtures, sink, supply carts, etc., are to be wiped down daily, Monday through Friday, to remove any dust or debris from accumulating, more often if needed.
* Spray or wipe down walls daily with a Peroxigard RTU if they become soiled with splatter from urine or feces.
* Use a brush to clean accumulated hair from the air returns daily.
* Sweep and mop the floor daily with a Peroxigard concentrate for floors.
* Trash is to be removed from the room daily and taken to the dumpster.
* Feed barrels and trash barrels are to be sanitized monthly and documented.

**IX. Veterinary Care**

* Rabbits are regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and require documented health checks on a monthly basis for USDA records.
* Rabbits require physical examinations by trained LAR staff every 2 weeks for the first month after their arrival in the facility. Rabbits require once monthly physical examinations after the first month for the duration of their stay in LAR.
* Health check logs are located in a loose-leaf binder in the LAR office in HSB 009. These logs should be dated, filled out with physical examination findings (including body weight), and initialed by the LAR staff performing the examinations.