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Floriane Derbez, Laurence Lamothe

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# CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND ENTRY PATHS INTO RABBIT FARMING

Derbez F.<sup>1</sup>, Fortun-Lamothe L.<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UMR 1041 CESEAR, 26, bd Docteur Petitjean, BP 87999, 21079 Dijon Cedex, France

<sup>2</sup>UMR 1388 GenPhySE, INRAe, 24 Chemin de Borde Rouge, 31326 Castanet-Tolosan, France

\*Corresponding author: [laurence.lamothe@inrae.fr](mailto:laurence.lamothe@inrae.fr)

## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand why rabbit farmers enter the profession and the career aspirations of current and potential farmers. In 2023, we interviewed 21 current or potential rabbit farmers in France (each for ca. 3 hours, with or without farm visits) whose farms represented a variety of systems. We also observed 12 potential farmers during a training session for project leaders of organic rabbit-farming systems. We performed thematic analysis of full transcripts of interviews using Nvivo software. Data analysis identified three main paths for establishing a rabbit farm: i) taking over rabbit farming within the family, ii) creating a new farm or iii) a career change. Detailed understanding of the mechanisms and paths of entry into the rabbit-farming profession, as well as the justifications given by farmers, enabled us to identify 14 career aspirations, which were integrated into a serious game (Insta'Lap) designed to help design rabbit-farming systems.

**Key words:** aspirations, professional path, rabbit, farmers

## INTRODUCTION

The 2020 agricultural census in France showed that more than 66% of farmers are over 50, and ca. 25% are over 60 (Agreste, 2022). Since 2010, the number of rabbit farms in France has decreased by 46%. This decline could increase over the next few years, as some farmers retire and find it difficult to find new owners for their farms. At the same time, the rabbit-farming sector is facing two major challenges: i) decreasing consumption of rabbit meat and ii) public demand for more animal-welfare-friendly farming. These challenges are profoundly challenging the sector's dominant production methods – cages – and are undermining the entire sector.

In recent years, the French rabbit-farming sector has been committed to changing its practices, such as by decreasing the use of antibiotics and developing tools for progress (e.g. Charter of Good Farming Practices, training of animal-welfare specialists; Travel et al., 2023). However, in this critical context, redesign of rabbit-farming systems seems necessary (Hill and MacRae, 1995). New systems have emerged in recent years and are currently being tested or developed (Gohier et al., 2023; André et al., 2023). These approaches, supported by the conventional sector, coexist alongside an alternative form of outdoor rabbit farming, which has been developing and federating a network of ca. 50 farmers since the 2010s, with or without organic certification (Roinsard et al., 2016, Gidenne et al., 2022). These systems are presented as being potentially more attractive to young farmers, as they would help to improve the image of the profession, particularly in terms of animal welfare. But what is the reality?

To contribute to the redesign (and attractiveness) of rabbit-farming systems, we felt it essential to examine the reasons, hitherto little explored, that motivate individuals to enter the rabbit-farming profession. While the factors that influence farmers to adopt innovative animal-welfare practices are now better known (Chiron et al., 2022), little is known about the professional aspirations of farmers and how they enter the rabbit-farming profession. The present study is in line with this perspective. The study thus aimed to understand why individuals enter the rabbit-farming profession, as well as the justifications, reasons for satisfaction and expectations (for potential rabbit farmers) they have of the profession.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **The farmers interviewed and systems**

We performed qualitative sociological interviews of 21 current or potential rabbit farmers in France in 2023. The farmers were both men (n=14) and women (n=7). The systems of the farmers interviewed were deliberately varied and did not represent the true distribution of system types in the sector: barns (n=6), barns with outdoor access (n=1) and/or outdoors (n=12), the last of which were either organic (n=7) or not (n=5). Finally, two individuals interviewed were planning to establish a rabbit farm. The farms were located throughout France.

We used the biographical interview method (Bertaux, 2016), which involves collecting life stories based on a central question posed to respondents (i.e. "How and why did you become a rabbit farmer?"). Most of the interviews, which lasted a mean of 3 hours, were performed face-to-face (n=14) and were accompanied, when possible, by observations of the farm during a visit (n=10). They were supplemented by observations of 12 potential farmers who were involved in a 3-day training session for project leaders of organic rabbit-farming systems.

### **Data analysis**

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. We then performed thematic analysis (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2012) of the transcripts using Nvivo software (Lumivero, Denver, Colorado, USA) following the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The data analysis enabled us to identify three entry paths into rabbit farming and 14 professional motivations.

### **Establishing a rabbit farm**

The three main paths for establishing a rabbit farm were the following:

#### **i) Taking over a family rabbit farm**

Five farmers followed this path (24%), which reflected the phenomenon of social reproduction: rabbit farming was the continuation of a specific primary socialization (Bourdieu, 1972) that led these individuals to spend their childhood behind the scenes of rabbit farming, mainly with their mothers. The fact that they "took over" and that this takeover appeared "natural", particularly when their parents retired, partly obscured the need to reflect on technical decisions, as these farmers "inherited" both technical (e.g. barns, material production configurations) and cognitive (e.g. knowledge of rabbit-breeding management) systems that predated them.

#### **ii) Creating a new farm**

Seven farmers followed this path (33%), and their main characteristic was the desire to establish a farm after training, whether they came from a farming background or not. They had all showed a strong interest in animal farming (i.e. cattle, goats or sheep), but never specifically rabbit farming. Rabbit farming was largely unknown to them, especially in the absence of specific training (the "Specialization Certificate" was discontinued in France in 2001). For some of them, establishing a rabbit farm was a "disappointing" move because it only partially fulfilled their expectations: they had the satisfaction of becoming farmers, but not of the animals they had initially envisioned. In the absence of specific training, the decision to establish a rabbit farm (whether a barn or outdoor system) was always driven by a third party (e.g. agricultural adviser, cooperative technician, another farmer), but also to overcome certain constraints inherent in establishing a farm (e.g. high cost of land).

iii) Rabbit farming as a career change

Eight farmers (38%) had had a professional career outside the agricultural sector before establishing a rabbit farm. For them, establishing an animal farm was a "professional break" (Denave, 2006) and a "biographical bifurcation" (Bidart, 2006). Farming thus appeared as a possible path to a new career (e.g. following assessment of skills, due close ties with the farming world in social circles). They expressed an interest in raising small animals, and the size of rabbits seemed to be an argument to legitimize their career change, making it appear feasible to those outside the agricultural sector. Most decided to develop small rabbit farms, mostly outdoors (87,5%), often with organic certification, and combined with other professional agricultural or rural activities (e.g. a countryside holiday cottage). Finally, they had higher professional qualification (level III, II or I) than farmers of the other two paths did. This path can be compared to that of certain executives who seek an interesting topic or activity in their work that corresponds to their personal aspirations (Jourdain, 2014). In these cases, rabbit farming made it possible to reconcile several aspirations in relation to a previous career path that served as a point of comparison. As for the previous path, individuals often entered the profession via a third party.

**Professional aspirations of rabbit farmers**

Investigating the reasons of rabbit farming has enabled us to identify the fundamental motivations behind this choice. The professional aspirations given for becoming rabbit farmers varied greatly depending on the type of system (e.g. barn vs. outdoors) and entry path (Table 1). This was not surprising given the obvious differences in the tasks required by indoor vs. outdoor rabbit farming. We then thought it would be relevant to consider these motivations as potential aspirations for futures farmers and that could be an essential dimension to integrate into their support. After a work session with rabbit farming specialists and futures rabbit farmers, we rework the first motivational list to ensure it reflects the diversity of breeders and farming systems.

**Table 1:** List of professional and personal aspirations for rabbit farmers

Professional aspiration	Professional aspiration
Work indoors	Be able to develop several skills
Work outdoors	Have work that requires technical skills
Balance professional and personal lives	Establish at a lower cost
Have the freedom to organize the work	Establish with little land
Have a planned job	Respect animal welfare
Be self-sufficient (in inputs, decision making, technology)	Produce a product that meets consumer expectations
Control the selling price	Have a profitable business

We used the diversity of these aspirations to build a serious game (Insta'Lap) designed to help design rabbit farms. Aspirations are a central mechanism of the game because players must choose their aspirations before they can make technical choices. The aim of the game is to enable players to reflect on the ability of the rabbit-farming systems they establish to meet their aspirations.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This study enabled us to highlight three types of entry paths into the rabbit-farming profession that were characterized by distinct relationships with the animals, types of systems and professional aspirations. Quantitative analysis and detailed understanding of the influencing factors of different farming systems and paths of entry into the rabbit-farming profession, as well as the justifications given by farmers would be interesting to study in the future. Such results could be used in

strategies to support change within the sector toward more sustainability and to meet the challenge of generational renewal of farm ownership.

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