

Speaking Up For Rabbits

This file contains master slides

Information is intended for speaker education.
Information is repetitive between slides.

You can use this to remind you of facts prior to
educating others.

Executive Summary: Why Ban Pet Rabbit Sales?

Problem: Rescues and Animal Services are Overwhelmed

- Rabbits are the **third most abandoned pet**.
- Most are bought impulsively without understanding proper care.
- Foster-based rescues are constantly at capacity, limiting how many rabbits can be taken in.

Key Issues with Pet Store Sales

- **Lack of Education:** Pet stores provide little to no guidance on rabbit care.
- **High Abandonment Rates:** Many owners surrender or release rabbits when they become too much to handle.
- **Burden on Resources:** Rescues, animal services, and taxpayers bear the financial cost of abandoned rabbits.

Agriculture and Environmental Concerns

- **Feral Populations:** Released rabbits damage crops and property.
- **RHDV2 Threat:** This highly contagious, deadly virus spreads among domestic and wild rabbits, endangering agriculture.

Solution: Ban Pet Rabbit Sales & Promote Adoption

- Reduces rescue intake rates.
- Prevents impulse purchases and promotes informed pet ownership.
- Protects agriculture and local communities from rabbit-related damage and the spread of RHDV2
- Aligns with successful policies in other cities that decreased intake requests and increased adoption rates.

Call to Action

- Support legislation to ban pet rabbit sales.
- Encourage responsible pet ownership through adoption and education.
- Help reduce the burden on rescues, animal services, and local communities

Responsible Choices: Shift from Rabbit Sales to Adoptions

Impulse Purchases Fuel Abandonment

*Rabbits are frequently purchased on impulse, especially around holidays like Easter and Christmas. Studies have shown a spike in rabbit surrenders following these holidays.**

Banning pet store sales reduces impulse buys and encourages mindful adoption through rescues, where education is necessary.

Abandonment Impacts Communities

*Rabbit abandonment in Florida has made national news on multiple occasions. Rabbit colonies have dug holes, chewed through wiring, and impeded traffic, yet many residents push for humane resolutions with the help of local rescues.****

Due to their short gestation period, a pair of rabbits could produce over 3.7 million rabbits in 4 years.

Lack of Education Leads to Abandonment

*Research indicates that pet store staff often provide insufficient or inaccurate care information. This leaves many rabbit owners unaware of a rabbit's basic needs, behaviors, and care costs, contributing to neglect and abandonment.***

We can no longer afford taking a reactive approach toward rabbit abandonment



Areas with Successful Models

Areas that have banned pet store rabbit sales saw a decrease in shelter intake numbers and higher adoption rates.† Adopted rabbits are also vaccinated against the highly contagious and deadly RHDV2 virus.

Rabbit adoptions in Florida spiked in 2020 / 2021 when rabbits were not sold in stores.

Rescues are Overwhelmed

Many shelters don't accept rabbits, leaving rescues as the primary resource for rabbit intakes. Florida has less than 15 rabbit rescues and many are operating above-capacity. Many rescues can only accept strays or support shelter rehousing due to lack of capacity.

Regulating backyard breeders and other pet outlets is key to reducing the growing influx of abandoned pet rabbits.

Managing Impact to Pet Stores

Banning rabbit sales doesn't mean harming businesses. Pet stores can transition to selling supplies and hosting adoption events in partnership with local rescues. Similar models have been implemented in areas with similar bans, allowing businesses to thrive while supporting animal welfare.†

Rabbits are then 3rd most abandoned pet.*

* House Rabbit Society study (2019); **PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report (2023); ***CBSNews.com (2023); †Municipal Data (CA, NY)

In the News: Rabbit Abandonment Impacts Communities

Brevard County Rabbit Dumping

Rabbit abandonments continue to increase, and the Space Coast Rabbit Rescue doesn't have enough foster homes to accommodate all of the intake requests. They are pleading with county commissioners to take action before the pet rabbit population gets out of control.

News coverage: Fox 35, Good Day Orlando, Channel 13, Florida Today; National coverage – Yahoo, USA Today Network

Naples – Orange Tree (2024)

A pet breeder abandoned several pet rabbits in the neighborhood, leading to a colony of approximately 100 rabbits. These domestic rabbits have been attacked by predators and dogs, shot by residents with pellet guns, and struck by vehicles. Collier County Animal Services does not have the resources to capture the rabbits.

News coverage: Coastal Breeze News, The Naples Press

Wilton Manor (2023)

A resident abandoned rabbits in the Wilton Manor neighborhood. The rabbits quickly grew into a colony of 60 to 100 rabbits causing property damage and crowding of sidewalks and roads. At the urging of residents, the city partnered with a local rescue to humanely capture the rabbits and place them in foster homes.

News coverage: The Guardian, CBS, NBC, New York Times

By the Numbers – Orlando Rabbit Care and Adoptions (ORCA)*

- Since 2018, medical costs have increased steadily from \$11K to **over \$75K**
- Adoptions increased by **36%** in 2020/2021 when rabbits were not being sold stores
- Intake requests consistently out number adoptions
- There are less than 15 rescues in Florida; they are all struggling to find homes for abandoned rabbits and cover medical costs.

Rabbit key facts

- Roughly 10 rabbit-focused rescues in Florida
 - Most are operating at or above comfortable capacity
 - Many larger shelters/animal controls do not accept rabbits as a species
 - If they do, many do not spay/neuter
 - Rabbit-focused rescues are relied on to accept homeless rabbits – typically with no funding provided to help for care and medical needs
- Domestic rabbits are third most populous animal found in shelters
 - Very prolific breeders
- Rabbits are not low-cost, starter pets
 - Can live 9-13 years indoors
 - Spay/neuter is important and all medical care is costly
- Rabbits are often impulse buys with sellers not providing experienced education on cost and care

Stray rabbits are where cats were twenty years ago.

If this situation is not addressed now, the future may see colonies of rabbits, similar to feral cat colonies

When considering laws impacting dogs and cats ask
– Should Rabbits be Included?

There are less than 15 rabbit-focused rescues in Florida

- Many larger and publicly-funded shelters do not accept rabbits as a species.
 - Often, when they do – the smaller rabbit-focused rescues are asked to take the animals
- Many of the rabbit rescues have a waitlist or have stopped admissions
- Most, if not all, of them non-profit spay/neuter and vaccinate as a condition of adoption
- Some 2024 stats (number of reporting rescues indicated)
 - Medical costs (2 mid-sized, 1 small rescue) \$144K (\$41 spay/neuter, \$103 general medical)
 - Number of intake requests (2 mid-sized rescues) 861
 - Number of rabbits requested to rescue/rehome (2 mid-sized rescues) 2,163

Domestic rabbits are the third most populous animals in shelters

- The fact that so many rabbits are found in shelters is driven by several factors
- Rabbits are prolific breeders. A single pair of intact rabbits and their offspring can result in **3.7 Million** rabbits after four years (Minnesota Spay and Neuter Assistance Program)
- Misunderstanding at time of purchase
 - In Florida, rabbits can be sold at 8 weeks of age, yet many rabbit vets will not sex rabbits until they are ten weeks old – because it is hard to determine their gender
 - Pet stores may rely on breeder information when assuring a customer that they are buying two sisters or brothers
 - Rescues often hear how a bunny parent was told that they bought two females, then was surprised with a litter. Since rabbits can get pregnant the day they give birth, there is frequently a second litter expected!



Bunpocalypse!
1 Pair of intact rabbits
+ 4 Years making babies
= 4 Million more rabbits*

3,745,584
IN FOUR YEARS!

SPAY & NEUTER

MNSNAP
SPAY NEUTER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

* <http://www.bio.miami.edu/hare/scary.html>

Animal Advocates talk about Kitten Season, with female cats having the ability to have three litters a year

Rabbit Season is year-round, with rabbits able to have a litter every month

Florida needs to act now-



Stray rabbits are where cats were twenty years ago.

If this situation is not addressed now, the future may see colonies of rabbits, similar to feral cat colonies

Rabbits are not low-cost, starter pets

- One of the main reasons for abandoning pet rabbits is cost
 - When rabbits reach puberty, at a few months old, they become hormonal – spraying and becoming aggressive. This is the time when families learn that they should spay or neuter, even if they have a single rabbit. They learn hard facts that were not shared when they purchased their new pet
 - Many veterinarians are not comfortable treating rabbits. Exotic rabbit vets require additional training, and their patients require longer appointment times - so medical care costs more
 - In the greater Orlando area, which is representative of costs in the state, Spay/Neuter and vaccination costs total over \$500 - costly for the relatively inexpensive pet you acquired
 - Average vet visit for an annual well-bunny checkup is \$110
 - One can expect to spend \$325 for a sick bunny visit. If surgery is required, costs are often \$900+
 - There are few, if any, low-cost options available to the general public

	DOGS	CATS	RABBITS
Low cost spay/neuter	YES	YES	Very limited, if any
Shelters intaking	YES	YES	Very limited
TNR Program TrapNeuterRelease	NA	YES	NO
Pet Store sales prohibition	Varies	Varies	Very limited
Low cost clinics/vaccines	YES	YES	NO
Able to survive outside with aid	NO	YES	NO

Consumer Protection Warning!

Rabbits are often impulse buys with sellers not providing education on cost and care

- Rabbits acquired from pet stores, flea markets and backyard breeders are often an impulse purchase
 - Rabbits have a 10+ year lifespan and require an exotic vet. Contrary to popular belief, they are not starter pets or good for children.
- Pets stores often get the gender wrong, leading to unwanted litters and a financial burden on consumers and the community.
 - Rabbits are extremely difficult to sex at a young age. Vets even have difficulty. Pet store employees are not trained to identify the difference, leading to consumers unknowingly purchasing male/female pairs of unaltered rabbits that result in unwanted litters.
 - Costs for a rabbit spay/neuter start at \$250 and are often over \$500. Some vets charge \$1000 for a spay. This puts sterilization surgery out of range for many families who thought they were buying a low-cost pet
 - Rabbits are prolific breeders! Females can get pregnant the day of delivery. By the time a family realizes they have an unexpected litter, the female is often pregnant with a second litter.
 - Gestation is about 30 days and rabbits can become pregnant at 3 months old.
 - One pair of rabbits can create 3.7M rabbits in 4 years (Minnesota Spay and Neuter Assistance Program)
- Families are often given misinformation by pet stores.
 - Employees regularly provide inaccurate information about rabbit care and their true dietary, health, and space needs, perpetuating the “starter pet” myth
 - Rabbits require costly care; a large, indoor, bunny-proofed space; and a diet rich in a variety of vegetables, pellets, and hay. Consumers often learn this after the purchase of the pet.
 - Rabbits are fragile and not good for children, but pet stores won't tell this to prospective buyers. Rabbits do not like to be held. They can nip and scratch young
- Lack of shelter support. Since many shelters/animal control facilities do not accept rabbits, families can be left in the lurch. This puts additional burden on already overstretched rescues, who most times are unable to accommodate intake requests.
- Consumers are suddenly left with the expense of six or more animals and few options.
 - They are faced with limited option of rescue or the decision to set their animals ‘free’.
 - This results in rabbits being dumped in neighborhoods or other areas where uncontrolled breeding takes place.
 - It is estimated that a domestic rabbit can survive about six months in the wild. Being a different species than wild rabbits, they do not have the same survival skills.
 - Some county laws define stray animals as only dogs or cats – meaning Animal Control cannot pickup stray rabbits.

Threat of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus 2 (RHDV2)

- RHDV2 is a highly infectious virus that affects domestic and wild rabbits, causing death in 50-100% of cases.
- There is no cure, although there is a vaccine available.
- The virus can be carried on living beings and inanimate objects (such as tires and shoes) and can live over 100 days.
 - Can be passed to rabbits by other wildlife, who will not demonstrate evidence of disease.
 - Can be transmitted by persons from an infected area visiting Florida.
- There have been few documented cases in Florida, but several states in the western United States have seen the impacts of the disease (see interactive map of identified cases <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/rabbit-hemorrhagic-disease-map>)
- Although under control in late 2024, an outbreak could seriously impact the environment
 - Rabbits are a part of the wildlife food chain.
 - Florida is home to the Lower Keys Marsh Rabbit. Unlike the everyday cottontail, the Lower Keys Marsh Rabbit has been listed as federally endangered since 1990, and it is estimated that only 100-300 specimens exist. This means that RHDV2 could quite literally wipe out an entire endangered species.

What can the future look like?

- Require sellers of domestic rabbits to meet minimum standards including:
 - Spay/neuter/microchipping prior to sale
 - Abandoned animals who are found in the wild will be identified back to seller, who will be required to pay a fine
- Restrict sales of rabbits, at least around Easter holidays (March and April), adopting an adoption model where stores work with rescues to place homeless animals in adoptive homes.
- Require backyard breeders/flea markets to be licensed and withhold same standards as pet stores.

Documents from the Humane Society of the United States

Pet Store Fact Sheet – see separate file

2021 Pet Store Industry Trends and Leader Quotes – see separate file

- Although focused on dogs and cats, many facts can be extended to rabbits.
 - You don't hear about "rabbit mills" but rabbits suffer from lives spent in inhumane situations
 - Small breeders are often the start of mass dumps that are addressed by rabbit rescues or law enforcement (who frequently turn to rabbit rescues for help).
 - Effort and funding falls on the rescues
- Pet stores can focus on selling supplies vs animals

The State of New York recently enacted laws that can be a model

As of December 15, 2024, New York State law prohibits the sale of dogs, cats and rabbits in retail pet stores. *This law is part of the Puppy Mill Pipeline Act, which aims to stop the sale of animals from puppy mills and other unethical breeders.*

- Pet stores can partner with animal rescue groups to showcase animals for adoption.
 - The law allows pet stores to receive a reasonable fee from animal rescue groups for space to showcase animals.
- The law allows the state attorney general to bring injunctions against violators, who may face civil penalties of up to \$1,000.
- Supporters
 - Supporters of the law say it will help stop the sale of animals from puppy mills and unethical breeders.
 - They say the law will help protect animals from harsh treatment.
- Critics
 - Some businesses have pushed back against the law, arguing they may need to close.
 - The Pet Advocacy Network, which represents breeders and retailers, argues the law will force businesses to close.
 - BUT see next page which highlights reported trends by Pet Industry association (next page)

References to some hoarding cases/colonies

Citrus County Feb 2025: email sent to rabbit rescues throughout the state

From: **Leigh E. Sweet** <Leigh.Sweet@citrusbocc.com>
Date: Wed, Feb 12, 2025 at 10:05 AM
Subject: Citrus County Animal Services - Rescue Partnership Request
To: info@orlandorabbit.org <info@orlandorabbit.org>

Good Morning,

Reaching out hoping you might be able to help with a large scale (100+) animal cruelty seizure we took in yesterday. With this volume of rabbits we clearly don't expect a single agency to pull or support all of them but any little bit you could do would help. If you have space and are able to pull, have a lead or partnership with another agency that could help, or have any resources you'd be able to spare we'd be greatly appreciative. As our veterinarian examines them, I'll have more information, pictures to share, and they'll be cleared for rescue placement. Right now we're just trying to figure out what resources and pathway options are available. I'll also be reaching out the the list of rescue and resource partners you have on your website but thanks for any assistance or guidance you can provide.

Shine On,

Leigh Sweet, Foster & Rescue Specialist; Citrus County Animal Service; 352-746-8406

Jacksonville Jan 2025 https://youtu.be/uDtKvpbKDOY?si=lzB_dIOFvPeLdKvA

Tennessee Aug 2024 <https://www.humanesociety.org/news/more-100-rabbits-rescued-overwhelmed-caregivers-home-chattanooga-tennessee>

Bonita Springs Aug 2024 https://www.coastalbreezenews.com/lifestyles/pet-rabbits-on-the-run-in-collier-neighborhood/article_28da3756-6550-11ef-b8c5-63f0e8b16904.html

Wilton Manors July 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vY1eZQYJRc>

Animal Advocates talk about Kitten Season, with female cats having the ability to have three litters a year

Rabbit Season is year-round, with rabbits able to have a litter every month

February 2025



East Coast Rabbit Rescue is 🥺 feeling heartbroken. ...
5m · 🌐

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of Harvey, a rabbit rescued from a local pet store. As you may recall, Harvey was confined to a small, dark cage without access to veterinary care for nearly a year, resulting in severe dental infection and malnutrition, evident in his prominent rib cage, spine, and pelvic bones. A strong odor, similar to rotten eggs, was also present. Upon our initial veterinary visit, Dr. Romo stated that Harvey's dental condition was the most severe case he had ever encountered. 😞 Since his rescue on November 04, 2024, Harvey has received veterinary care SEVEN times. ❤️😞 Despite his traumatic experience, Harvey proved to be incredibly affectionate. ❤️ We are heartbroken that his last veterinary visit, just 4 days ago, showed signs of improvement. ❤️ A necropsy is planned, but considering Harvey's history of neglect and abuse, the results may serve as further evidence of his suffering. ❤️❤️😞 At least we were able to provide him with love and care since his rescue on November 04 last year. Last night, he ate his treats, received his medication, and even showed affection. It was his final goodbye. ❤️

Harvey, it is clear that love alone could not save you. Rest in peace, dear Harvey, until we are reunited.



**** Please let his death serve as a reminder to refrain from purchasing rabbits from breeders and pet stores while rescues are filled with unwanted rabbits. ❤️❤️❤️😞

