Standard Operating Procedure
Behavioral Management - Rabbits

Objective: To describe aspects of the program of behavioral management for rabbits

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Purpose

UNC Charlotte recognizes the need for laboratory animals to be able to demonstrate species-typical behaviors in a benign and enriched environment. By allowing natural behaviors to be exhibited and providing environmental enrichment, laboratory animals may show reduced stress and anxiety, enhanced well-being, and are given a choice in coping mechanisms to avoid environmental stressors (i.e. temperature changes, social conflict, environmental disturbances, etc.) (Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals, 8th edition: 2011). For rabbits, these behaviors include grooming, exploring, gnawing, reproduction, and resting.

However, it is also understood that some animals may react adversely to the introduction of novel items to their immediate environment, therefore no animals will be subjected to the presence of items they find distressing (OLAW Position Statement #2b: Environmental Enrichment: http://grants.nih.gov/grants/olaw/2011positionstatement.htm)

Procedures

Structural Environment

To create opportunities for species-typical postures and activities, rabbits will be maintained:

1) In caging with open fronts and/or sides, to allow visualizing of the macroenvironment, and neighboring animals;
2) In caging sized to allow postural adjustments characteristic of rabbits; and
3) By using feed that requires gnawing, and can be carried off in small pieces.

Social Environment

To provide a social environment that promotes physical contact and communication:

1) Rabbits will be housed in such a way that they can see and hear other rabbits, as well as the room environment, given the limitations of available caging and compliance with the Guide;
2) Daily technician observation for signs of stereotypical behavior;
3) Staff will recognize that they form part of the animals’ social environment; and
4) Staff will be trained in suitable handling and restraint.
**Activity**

To encourage activity:

1) Wire cage doors will be used to allow visualizing of the room environment, and to encourage contact with staff;
2) Animals will be caged below the densities allowed by the *Guide* to provide space for activity and postural adjustment; and
3) Appropriate supplemental devices (paper toweling, cardboard tubes or sheets, PVC tubes, plastic balls) will be provided on a rotating basis for those animals used on long-term studies (greater than 120 days), or at the direction of the Attending Veterinarian or Director of Laboratory Animal Resources.

Questions regarding rabbit behavioral management should be addressed to the Director of Laboratory Animal Resources or the Attending Veterinarian.

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**Health and Safety --** None

**Personnel/Training/Responsibilities --** Assuring knowledge of the pertinent aspects of rabbit behavioral management is the responsibility of the Director, Laboratory Animal Resources and the Attending Veterinarian

**Required Materials --** Enrichment items; Observation reports

**Guidelines --**

- “Comfortable Quarters for Laboratory Animals” (1997)

**Quality Control Checks and Acceptance Criteria --** Direct observation by the population of animal users at UNC Charlotte.