Angora Rabbit Farming in South Africa.

Mr. F. N. Bonsma, Research Officer of the Division of Field and Animal Husbandry, discusses here the possibilities of the Angora Rabbit for wool production as a side line to poultry and vegetable farming in South Africa. An article on the Chinchilla rabbit will be published in the next number of this paper.

Rabbit farming for commercial wool and pelt production has developed enormously in France and England during the last few years, and people have gradually realized the possibilities of this branch of farming as a side line with poultry and vegetable farming. In France a great many Angora farms, of some size, have already been established, and several mills have been erected. In England several societies and clubs have been formed, e.g. Scottish Fur Breeders Association, The Fur Board, Ltd., British Fur Products, Ltd., etc.

Rabbit breeding for commercial purposes is practically unknown in South Africa. In 1923 Miss Harrison, of The Knoll, Eshowe, succeeded with great difficulty in obtaining permission to import three Chinchilla rabbits into the country, a buck and two does. Since then, her stock has successfully increased and at present there are about 25 breeders in the country whose stock can all be traced back directly or indirectly to Miss Harrison’s original stock.

Results of an Investigation.

The progress made by the rabbit industry overseas as well as the numerous requests from the present breeders to obtain permits to introduce new blood into the country led to an investigation and inspection by the Department of Agriculture of the present existing rabbitries. The most important breeders of Chinchilla rabbits were interviewed and their rabbitries inspected. The following are some of the most important conclusions drawn from this investigation.

(1) It is most unlikely that these rabbits will ever become a pest in this country for the following reasons:

(a) For fur and wool production these rabbits must be kept in separate hutches, as burrowing ruins their coat.

(b) From the experience of several rabbit breeders it was found that when these rabbits are allowed to burrow and kindle (farrow) under ground the young are frequently destroyed by ants.

(c) Fur rabbits, especially Chinchillas and Angoras, are so highly domesticated that it will practically be impossible for them to live in the open.

(d) These rabbits will readily become the prey of dogs, also some birds of prey, carnivora, and natives who are very fond of rabbit meat.

(2) In order to obtain success certain definite restrictions should be laid down in connection with the hutches in which these rabbits should be kept. The reasons for this being—to encourage the production of high quality wool and fur only, to prevent all possibilities of these rabbits from becoming a pest to the country, and (for hygienic reasons) to allow proper and not indiscriminate breeding.

Experiments at Cedara.

The Angora rabbit is still quite unknown in South Africa, and no breeders of these rabbits could be traced. Mr. J. T. Ley, of Ewanrigg, Southern Rhodesia, presented the Department with two Angoras which have been shipped to the School of Agriculture, Cedara, where they arrived in good condition on the 20th of June, 1927. It is proposed to import some more Angoras as well as Chinchilla rabbits in order to start at this Institution experimental work on the comparative possibilities of Chinchilla pelt and Angora wool production in South Africa.

At present there is a great demand for Angora wool at remunerative prices, with practically no seasonal variations, although, of course, it is not unique in having never-varying prices. It seems, however, that the present demand for Angora wool will continue for at least a number of years, as will be noticed from the following extract from Dr. McDougall’s report published in Fur and Feather, of the 7th January, 1927, the result of an investigation made by him into the future of the Angora wool industry in Great Britain:

A Stable Market.

“The whole future of the industry depends upon the security that could be given to the producer in relation to a continued demand for wool at a price that would pay for its production. The uncertainty on these two cardinal points has troubled many of our largest wool farmers, just as it has exercised the minds of those in authority in the clubs which look after the interests of breeders of Angora rabbits. Though the spinners cannot—no sound business man ever thought for one moment that any fall in the demand will come about, or that there will be any reduction in price. Coming from those in the best position to express an opinion this information is indeed valuable.

“Though we have no authority for saying so, we are confident, from the information and facts placed before us privately, that there will be no slackening of demand, nor any appreciable alteration in price during the next ten years. On the contrary, there is every sign that, if the quality is kept up to first grade, the demand will grow at a far more rapid rate than our supply can ever hope to do, so that there will always be a demand in excess of our capacity for production.”

The whole report, issued by Dr. McDougall as a result of his visit to Derwent Mills, Ltd., practically the sole buyers of raw material in England, is most encouraging.

The Angora Rabbit.

The Angora is named after the town Angora in Asia Minor and spread from there to France and Belgium and later to England.

This rabbit, unlike the other commercial breeds, is not a fur bearer but primarily a wool producer and is cropped at regular intervals year after year.

A well-developed Angora, in full wool, looks like a huge silky, puffed snowball, its head being almost hidden. In size, the adult Angora is no bigger that the common rabbit, although it looks much bigger, owing to its heavy fleece. A full-grown Angora weighs about 6 to 8 lbs. The whole body is evenly and thickly woolled with fine silky wool. The head is broad, short and bold in general appearance. The eyes are pink, and bright; the ears are comparatively short, well woolled with tufts at the tips. It may vary in colour: white, fawn, and blue, by far the most common being the pure white.

Price of Angora Wool.

The wool may either be plucked or preferably clipped at intervals of three to four months. A well-bred rabbit yields from 12 to 14 ounces of wool per annum.

The present price paid by the Derwent Mills, Matlock, for first-grade wool is 35s. per pound. Angora wool farmers in England consider that £1 per annum per rabbit profit on wool production only is a conservative estimate.

The wool is used for several purposes. When spun it is sold as knitting wool or made into garments which are far superior in quality.
South African Coulommier Cheese.

South African coulommier Cheese has to be eaten fresh, say 3 to 4 days after making, and is not suitable therefore for the export trade. It is quite simple to make when once the essential points are understood.

The process of manufacture is as follows:—

Take one gallon of sweet new milk, obtained under the most cleanly conditions possible, and strain immediately, i.e., while still warm from the cow, and place in an enamelled bucket. In summer the milk is then renneted at a temperature of 84° F., while in winter 86° or 88° F. is better, according to how cold it is. If the temperature of the milk has fallen below these figures, the milk must be warmed up to the correct temperature by standing the bucket containing same in another one containing hot water.

A ½ c.c. of rennet should be added to 1 gallon of milk. The rennet should first be diluted with about ten times its volume of water and then thoroughly stirred into the milk for three to five minutes.

The bucket is then covered over with a clot in order to keep out dust whilst setting.

After about 10 minutes, stir slightly so as to mix any cream which may have risen to the surface; this stirring being repeated until the milk coagulences to set. Take great care not to stir after coagulation commences.

Moulding the Cheese.

After 4 to 6 hours, the curd should be firm enough to ladle out into the moulds, which have previously been prepared by scalding in hot water, and placed on straw mats on boards which have also been previously scalded. The curd is best ladled out with a cream skimmer, not too thick slices being taken. Be careful at this stage not to break the slices, otherwise part of the curd will escape between the mould and straw mat, resulting in a slower and incomplete drainage. The same results will follow if the curd is too soft when ladled.

At first the moulds should be filled only 1 inch up, and then left for about ten or fifteen minutes. When filled up completely, leave over to drain until the following morning, when the curd should have sunk low enough to enable the top half of the mould to be removed. If it has not sunk sufficiently to allow of this, the cheese must be left until it can be done.

Removing the Cheese.

When the top half of the mould has been removed, place a scalded straw mat on top and a board over the mat: the cheese is then turned over on to the new mat and board, a little salt sprinkled on the new top surface, and again left to drain. In the evening, the cheese should be turned again in the same manner and the top sprinkled with a little salt: by the following morning the cheese should have sunk to about ½ inches thick and shrunk away from the sides of the mould so that it can be removed. The sides of the cheese as well as the top and bottom are then rubbed with a little salt. After twelve hours or so it is fit for eating and should keep for 5 or 6 days if kept in a cool place and turned daily.

Essential Points.

The essentials necessary for success are: (1) sweet, clean milk, and (2) care with temperatures.

If the milk be tainted in any way, the cheese will not drain properly, and the finished article will be full of holes, quite spongy in texture, and have a nasty flavour.

Too low a temperature at renneting will give slow coagulation, slow drainage and loss of curd, while too high a temperature at the same stage will give too rapid drainage with a finished cheese dry and tough in body and rather lacking in flavour.

The plant required to make two moulds, 2 straw mats, 2 boards, 1 cubic centimetre pipette (graduated in 1/10 of a c.c.) and, of course, an enamel bucket and thermometer. These articles can be obtained from any hardware firm.

Angora Rabbit Farming in S.A.

being much finer and warmer than those made from ordinary wool.

Union Prospects.

There seems to be a possible future for fur and wool rabbits in South Africa as a side line to poultry and vegetable farming, as well as on our irrigation settlements.

Rabbit farming requires a small capital investment; keeping costs are low, and the farmer gets a quick return from his investment. The proflificacy of rabbits is well known. The climatic conditions in South Africa, especially in the colder regions, seem very favourable for the production of high quality fur and wool.

Rabbit keeping, however, requires a great amount of daily personal attention, as well as a certain amount of skilled labour.