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To: Rains County Leader

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I know that spring and Easter is a very exciting time for kids, families, home owners, and farmers. This is also the time of year when kids and families purchase small animals such as chickens and rabbits. Many, many times after the purchase of these small animals I will get a call asking how to take care of this animal. The first thing that one needs to do is their homework on the animal that you will be purchasing. Since that is rarely done, I will discuss some tips on raising small animals.

Again, before purchasing any animal, do your homework. Find out what kind of pen or shelter is needed, what kind of feed the animal needs, and finally what do I do with this animal after it is grown. Small animals, such as rabbits and chickens, are warm and cuddly when they are young, but remember they all grow up.

Rabbits do not require any fancy or expensive equipment: They can be confined to hutches, and can be raised in urban, as well as rural, areas. They also can help you learn animal husbandry and the proper care and management of animals. Before you launch into a rabbit project, take some time to decide if it is right for you. Calculate whether you have time and money to care for your project, and decide if dogs, cats, and other wild animals in the area would be harmful to your rabbits.

Proper housing and good equipment are important for successfully raising rabbits. In making plans, consider first the rabbits' comfort and your ease of handling. You don't need a lot of equipment, but feeding, watering and nesting equipment must be adequate and sanitary.

Rabbit pens, called hutches, should be convenient and sanitary, allowing plenty of fresh air and some sunlight. Each hutch should protect the rabbits from bad weather, dogs and other animals, and provide enough room for growth and exercise. The most important point in building a hutch is sanitation. An open-air, self-cleaning hutch is recommended.

The beginning rabbit grower should use the kind of feed to which the rabbits are accustomed. Feed should be changed gradually; *sudden change makes rabbits sick and may kill them*. Rabbits should also be fed commercial feeds, not leafy greens. Leafy greens do not provide the dietary needs of the animal. Also, be sure to keep plenty of fresh water and shade for the rabbit.

When raising baby chicks, temperature control is the most important consideration when the chicks are young. Brooding lamps should be used to keep the house or the pens at 95 degrees F; gradually reduce the temperature 5 degrees each week until the birds are 3 to 4 weeks old, or until the house temperature reaches 70 degrees F.

When chicks are comfortable, they will bed down in a semicircle around the perimeter of the heat zone. If cold, chicks will crowd near the heat source. If too warm, they will move to the outer limits of the brooder guard. When winter temperatures permit, the house should be partially opened to improve airflow and remove moisture.

Supplemental heat may be needed when the outside temperature is low. In hot weather, fans or evaporative coolers are used to cool birds more than 4 weeks old.

When it comes to feeding chicks a good commercial feed needs to be used. Always keep fresh food and water available to the chicks. This is very critical for their development.

These projects are not hard to raise and do not take a whole lot of money or equipment to get started. However, they are just like any other animal; they do take time in caring for them. Children can use these projects to properly learn how to care for animals. But parents must be willing to spend as much time with the project as the child.

So before purchasing your real, live Easter bunnies, please consider how to raise them first and determine what you are going to do with them once they are grown.