

Dehydrated pelleted sainfoin for the growing rabbit: first results from intake and growth test

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Sainfoin (*Onobrychis viciifolia*) could be a good alternative to alfalfa for rabbit since it contains high ADF and ADL levels associated with a high level of protein. However no informations are available about its effect on intake and growth of the rabbit. Nowadays dehydrated pelleted sainfoin 'DpS' (PERLY variety) is available on the market (Multifolia company). Thus we designed two assays to evaluate the intake and growth of rabbit fed DpS (6 mm diameter, 15-23 mm length, hardness= 93 Mpa, crude protein=17.2%, ADF=30.4%, ADL=12.0%) as a sole feed (trial 1), or in free choice (trial 2) with commercial pelleted feed (CpF: 4 mm diam., 9-12 mm length, hardness= 6.5 Mpa, crude protein=15.9%, ADF=18.0, ADL=5.5%), and compared to a control group fed only the CpF. In trial 1, 2 groups of 30 rabbits (weaned at 39 d old) were housed in 2×6 cages, and fed freely either the DpS or the CpF, till 73 d old. In trial 2 (39-73 d old) one group of 96 rabbits (16 cages of 6) was fed freely the DpS and the CpF (in two separate feeders) and was compared to a control group (n=48, 8 cages of 6) fed the CpF only. Among the two trials, no health problems were detected on the animals. In trial 1, DpS intake reached 85.7 g/d (39-63 d period) and was similar to the intake of the control group (84.3 g/d; P>0.15). Although the DpS size and hardness was much higher than for CpF, the palatability of DpS was very high, since during the first week after weaning the intake was 78.5 g/d fo DpS, and 69.7 g/d for CpF (P<0.05). Growth of rabbit fed only DpS reached 18.5 g/d (39-73 d) and was logically lower than in control group (31.2 g/d, P<0.001). In trial 2 (39-73 d old) on a free choice basis rabbits ate 30% of DpS and 70% of CpF. The whole feed intake (DpS+CpF) was 23% higher than that of control (116.3 vs 94.2 g/d, P<0.05) and the rabbit growth was higher (34.6 vs 30.6, P<0.05). Thus dehydrated pelleted sainfoin seemed to be a good alternative to alfalfa as a fibre and protein source for the growing rabbit.