

# COUNCIL OF EUROPE

## COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS

RECOMMENDATION No. R (85) 14

OF THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS TO MEMBER STATES

ON THE INTRODUCTION OF THE AMERICAN COTTONTAIL RABBIT (*SYLVILAGUS SP*)  
INTO EUROPE

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 23 September 1985  
at the 388th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)*

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.b of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to the resolutions of the European Ministerial Conferences on the Environment;

Having regard to the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Berne Convention);

Having regard to Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R (84) 14 concerning the introduction of non-native species;

Having regard to the report of the European Committee for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (CDSN), Doc. SN-VS (83) 6, concerning the ecological consequences of the introduction of the American eastern cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) into Europe as well as to the report of the survey carried out in France by Council of Europe experts;

Congratulating the French Government on having had a study made of the problem of introducing *Sylvilagus floridanus* into France and thus providing the first example of the application of Recommendation No. R (84) 14;

Aware that *Sylvilagus floridanus* had already been illegally introduced into the natural environment in several European states and that its survival has not been fully ensured;

Observing that diversity of indigenous wildlife is essential to maintaining the biological balance of ecosystems;

Noting that *Sylvilagus floridanus* will extensively occupy the biotopes (agricultural areas and woodlands) of lagomorphs indigenous to Europe, which will run counter to the principle of preserving the diversity of native fauna and maintaining an ecological balance;

Considering that the highly varied diet of *Sylvilagus floridanus* may result in the species causing considerable damage to crops;

Recalling that the dangers and consequences of introducing a non-native species are often incalculable and unforeseeable in both the short and the long term, even if careful research has been carried out beforehand;

Noting that the ectoparasites of the American cottontail rabbit may cause infections transmissible to other mammals, including human beings;

Noting that these parasites may cause tularaemia (in the United States, 70% of human cases of this disease are due to contact with infected cottontails), Rocky Mountain spotted fever and plague;

Noting that the American cottontail may be a carrier of pseudo-tuberculosis, transmissible to other lagomorphs, notably the brown hare (*Lepus capensis*), which is particularly prone to this disease ;

Noting that the American cottontail may be resistant to myxomatosis while being a carrier of the disease, and that it is therefore at an advantage in competing with the European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) ;

Noting that many endoparasites of the American cottontail may constitute a threat to European lagomorphs (rabbits and hares) and may cause fever and serious septicaemia in other mammals ;

Believing that, as predation is one of the main natural causes of cottontail mortality, this might give rise to malevolence against some protection-worthy predators ;

Considering that the introduction of several species of American cottontail into Europe will be a costly operation and that the money could be better spent on European co-ordinated research into the resistance of *Oryctolagus cuniculus* to myxomatosis ;

Noting that the introduction of the American cottontail into the natural environment in Europe constitutes, for the above-mentioned reasons as well as for others, a threat to native wildlife, especially to lagomorphs ;

Recalling that on 21 June 1984 the Committee of Ministers adopted the principle of prohibiting the introduction of non-native species into the natural environment ;

Believing that the result of the extensive investigations carried out by the French authorities into the American cottontail do not warrant any departure from the above-mentioned principle in respect of that species ;

Noting that the member states of the Council of Europe as well as national and international nature conservation organisations are opposed to schemes for introducing the American cottontail into Europe,

Recommends the governments of member states :

— to prohibit, without exception, the introduction into Europe of non-native *Leporidae*, particularly the American eastern cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus floridanus*), and take all necessary measures to this effect ;

— to eradicate these animals, either actively or passively, wherever they have already been introduced.