

GROUP HOUSING SOWS - TAKE-AWAY NOTES

John Gadd
International Pig Consultant
Scallow Cottage, Parsonage Lane, Fontmell Magna
Shaftesbury, Dorset SP7 0PB England
E-mail: jngadd@aol.com

Britain and Sweden have had to abandon keeping gestation sows in stalls due to Welfare Legislation. Denmark and parts of France are voluntarily doing so pending an overall legally enforced ban, for *all* EU countries, by 2012.

Many European pig breeders now have 15 years experience of group housing sows. Designed and managed correctly performance is little or no worse (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of herds with sows housed in stalls and in groups on straw.

| | Stalls | Yards |
|--|--------|-------|
| Average number of sows / gilts per herd | 339 | 260 |
| Farrowing rate (%) | 83.8 | 84.7 |
| Average number of litters per sow | 2.31 | 2.27 |
| Average number of pigs reared per sow/year | 22.29 | 21.46 |
| Average number of pigs born alive/litter | 10.77 | 10.70 |
| Average number born dead/litter (%) | 11.56 | 11.45 |
| Mortality of pigs born alive (%) | 10.53 | 11.56 |

Source: Easicare Yearbook 1991

While these results may seem historical, remember that since the enforced ban on stalls, little or no reliable *large-scale* 'before-and-after' comparative results involving hundreds of herds, as in the above table, were possible once stalls became illegal.

(The above table is representative of several similar surveys of the time).

CONSIDERED ADVICE FROM EUROPEAN/PIONEER EXPERIENCE

1. **Changeover.** Allow up to 3 years to research which of the six proven systems will suit you best. *Visiting successful farmers on your shortlist is essential* – advice will be freely given.

Once up and running the learning curve is about 2 years (4 to 5 parities).

2. **Choice of system.** Slats plus some bedding or fully-bedded yards? The layout is very different between the two.

3. **Dynamic or stable groups?** The management is different between them, so investigate this carefully.
4. **Size of herd?** For large herds, one of several electronic feeding layouts is preferable. For smaller herds or groups one of several systems (Dump/spin dump, Trickle, Cafeteria, Cubicle) are suitable and cheaper.
5. **Management skills.** More detailed and difficult than stalls. Expert (or experienced) and *diligent stockmanship* needed. More *time* is needed. Correct protocols essential to ensure good pig flow and sow body condition.
6. **Pen and yard design.** Research this carefully. Guard against ‘forcing’ a layout in to existing structures and floor space on grounds of conversion difficulty and cost. Large sow groups (50+) allow more flexibility in design and electronic control of pig movement and selection.

To minimize aggression, follow the advice on lying and dunging areas *implicitly* and the siting of feeding points/stations also to reduce aggression. Provide ‘fleeing space’ if possible, especially with dynamic groups.

7. **Identification.** More difficult than with stalls. Large groups lie down more/are more contented on bedding/refuse to move. Tag in each ear, spray mark for individual attention. Preg-testing is easier.
8. **Inspection.** More *time* and *patience* needed, especially for foot and udder problems. Electronic estrus identification is easy.
9. **Mixing and introduction.** Many practical skills and much experience needed, especially for gilt introduction where a mixing pen(s) of special design is/are needed.
10. **Cost?** Varies considerably due to the suitability or otherwise of existing structures. Recovered changeover costs for an excellent conversion of existing buildings for a 500 sow herd have varied in a 20% to 40% reduction in breeding herd gross margin over a 2-year run-in period (5 parities; source: - clients records 2000-2004; EU economics).

Running costs (labor, straw) are higher, vet/med lower, feed costs similar.

11. **Should you do it?** Probably not until you have to, unless your buildings need renewal or you need to expand and are thinking of 10-15 years depreciation, or your sows are in less than ideal condition. Explore (and lobby for) welfare-driven grant-aid.
12. **Does it work?** Most breeders who have converted successfully say they would never go back to stalls again, due to vastly more contented sows and happier, easier-to-recruit/train/keep stockpeople. However breeders with inadequate housing and labor skills suffer many problems until these are put right.

13. **Do the much more contented sows breed better?** Rather strangely not, or not yet. Performance results are usually no better, no worse, suggesting *good* breeders look after their stalled sows pretty well as of now.
14. **Has the move encouraged the public to buy more pork?** No. Typical response is “You shouldn’t have been keeping sows that way (in stalls) anyway.” Consumption would have dropped however if the move had not been made. The market for ‘green, organic, humane’ pork production is still a small one in Europe (7 to 9%) but growing.