

ALTERNATIVE DRY SOW HOUSING

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ABSTRACT

It would be safe to say that one of the next big animal welfare issues for swine will be dry sow housing. Many countries have already started to change the way sows are housed. Most noticeable is the ban on dry sow stalls in the UK. Canadian swine producers can not get caught dismissing this trend. There are organizations already at work to try and change the use of dry sow stalls. Although legislation is unlikely in Canada, pressure on large food suppliers by consumer groups or special interest groups is already happening. Group housing systems have taken hold in Canada and there are many systems that have shown success. This is no longer new technology, and Canadian producers should be looking at implementing some of the loose housing practices before it is imposed on them. By no means is a dry stall ban the answer. In fact, dry sow stalls help in the welfare of the animal being raised. A proactive approach, by producers, in finding an alternative is the best solution. If Canadian producers were to research, design and implement a new sow housing protocol that is good for the sow and the producer, which incorporates both stalls and loose housing, then consumer groups and special interest groups will have a more difficult task implementing their agenda.

CURRENT EFFORTS TO MAKE CHANGES

There is already a trend to stop using dry sow stalls. The pressure on producers ultimately comes from the public, but not always directly. In the UK consumer concern about welfare of farm animals became an issue in the 1960s. Animal welfare organizations organized quickly, obtained extensive media coverage and became extremely effective lobbyists. In response, the UK government set up the Brambell Committee to examine how livestock are kept, and if any changes should be made. Using the principles implicit in the Brambell report, the Farm Animal Welfare Council developed a basis for discussion and legislation on animal welfare that became known as the "Five Freedoms". The Five Freedoms were later expanded with qualifying statements and these in turn formed the basis for the Code of Recommendations for Welfare of Livestock: Pigs. Despite this activity, Members of Parliament reported that they had more correspondence about animal welfare than any other issue. The construction of sow accommodation based on sow stalls and tethers was banned in October 1991, and the use of existing stall and tether systems was banned on January 1, 1999. This unilateral decision of the British government was taken ahead of any planned EU legislation. This action clearly shows that with the right pressure, governments will act.

Farm Sanctuary is a US group that helped form the initiative in Florida in 2002 amending the state's constitution resulting in a ban on gestation stalls. Although there are only a few producers in the state of Florida, this change has set a precedent that will be used in other states. Arizonans for Humane Farms has filed a petition with the Arizona Secretary of State to place an initiative on the state's 2006 ballot which would effectively ban gestation stalls. The initiative would promote legislation requiring that "pigs during pregnancy and calves raised for veal must be given sufficient space to turn around, lie down, and fully extend their limbs, when tethered, or confined in crates, cages and other enclosures..." This ballot initiative is similar to the one used in Florida and some of the same organizations are involved in putting it forward. Whether they win or not these groups will undoubtedly keep fighting within state legislatures. The Arizona fight will cost opposing farmers and ranchers over \$1 Million to fight. If these organizations continue to organize and raise funds it will just be a matter of time until they target a large hog producing state.

Safeway Inc. is the latest company to examine animal welfare issues. The company has agreed to form a committee that will consist of company employees and outside experts, including Colorado State University professor Temple Grandin. The news was hailed by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which lobbied company officials for changes. PETA owns 192 shares of Safeway stock. PETA is promoting controlled-atmosphere killing (CAK), and Safeway has agreed to contact its vendors to suggest they use CAK. All food retailing companies will listen to their customers and groups representing their customers. If companies become pressured to make changes they will make changes. Dr. Bernard Rollin, an outspoken critic of large-scale livestock and poultry operations, states "the public will force changes in agriculture not through animal cruelty rules and regulations, but through the power of the purse."

A recent article was printed on pignote.com titled "Harper Government Urged to Heed New Animal Welfare Scientific Report". This report released by the Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals (CCFA) has condemned the widespread use of stalls. They believe the use of stalls threatens foreign markets for Canadian pork. Although this report was funded by special interest groups (CCFA, World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA)) the results are meaningful. They focused on the size of stalls and the inability for the sow to turn around. They also go on to show that the sows stay there the entire time they are mothers. They go on to say that such behavior as bar biting shows the sows are going insane.

The work being done in North America by PETA and WSPA shows that both consumer driven and legislative campaigns are making head-way.

GROUP HOUSING IN CANADA

There is fear "out there" of loose housing systems. Loose housing is looked upon as more expensive, harder to manage, and less efficient than traditional stall housing. Today the costs of each system are very similar especially if an automatic feeder is being used. Arguments can be made on either side to which system is more economical. The important message is that each housing system can be implemented without one being more expensive.

Researchers from the University of Minnesota have reported that economic losses due to culling are the same. Pen housing removes more sows due to culling, while loose housing has higher mortality. They go on to report that there was no significant difference between housing systems for pigs born alive or pigs weaned. Chris Cockle from Heronbrook Farm LTD operates a 950 sow unit using loose housing. He states “the management of sows in this system is easy: vaccinating, and preg-checking for instance. The 19 square feet I calculate is the absolute minimum. The recommended number of 25 sq. feet is probably more appropriate, and would still be cost effective in comparison to stalled systems.” Any new system, especially if you are changing systems, will have to be approached differently when it comes to management, feed, genetics, and facility.

Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) is working with many industry partners on group sow housing. The research compares three different sow-housing systems and a gestation stall system. Each with a different feeding strategy, one includes free access stalls in which the animals can access a protected feed stall at their choosing. Another features a dual-level mezzanine system with feed stalls that provide no protection at feeding but provide a slightly larger floor area thanks to a second-floor mezzanine. Another incorporates an electronic sow feeder where sows are protected at feeding but can only be fed one at a time. Differing grouping systems will also be studied. In terms of behavior, the research team has chosen to focus on aggression in the initial mixing of the groups as it is the behavior that can have the most impact on health and productivity. The team will be looking at sow longevity in each system as well as reproductive performance. Kelly Lund, Engineer-in-Training for AAFRD is on the research team and she recommends that producers starting an enterprise should seriously consider a group housing system, if for no other reason than it is the direction the industry and the market opportunities are headed. This research will be very interesting to follow. It is very comprehensive and should have a lot of conclusions to offer on the comparison of these different systems.

I mentioned earlier I believe the dry stall still plays a very important role in a loose system. With loose housing you will still have sows that get too fat or too thin. By putting these types of sows in stalls, the proper body condition can be reached through individual feeding. Sows will still show some aggression which leads to boss sows and timid sows. If a sow is too aggressive or too timid, they can be placed into a stall for individual attention. These sows may mix better into other groups. Breeding AI is very efficient when the sows are in stalls. Sows are often fed differently during breeding and often need individual attention. By leaving any of these types of sows in a loose system with no where else to put them, is poor animal welfare practice. These reasons are why I think a dual system would work.

BEING PROACTIVE

It is very important for producers to not sit idle and hope nothing happens. The first step should at least be getting educated about the “no stall” issue. Dialogue between producers, producer groups, Canadian Pork Council and provincial ministries (OMAFRA) would certainly be the next step. These groups are in the best position to determine the best course of action on this issue. This step will undoubtedly be the most difficult. Many producers

believe that stalls offer excellent welfare and will not want to deviate from a 100% stall system. In order to move past this, producers will have to change their thinking to how welfare practices are perceived by the consumer. If the stance is developed to change to a combined stall and loose system, it will have to be based on research. How many stalls as a percentage of the population? How long can they stay in the stall? How wide should the stalls be? How long should the stall be? These are some of the questions that need to be answered. If the stall/loose housing system is what producers want to adopt, I think all the questions would be answered very quickly. Keeping an eye on such research, as that from Alberta, will help bolster the stall/loose housing system, from a welfare point of view. If producers feel a 100% stall system is an acceptable animal welfare practice, they better have data to support it and be prepared for a fight. The cost to fight a stall ban is in the millions, so being proactive and implementing a new code of practice that doesn't include a total ban looks good. Being proactive and implementing a producer driven change could also allow for more desirable "phase" in periods than that of an imposed stall ban. If the Canadian pork industry were to voluntarily implement a new code of practice for housing sows that included stalls and loose housing, I believe it would gain great respect across the world, including special interest groups.

CONCLUSIONS

With the increased efforts of special interest groups trying to ban stalls, and succeeding in some areas, producers need to start acting. The industry needs to organize and implement housing changes that are beneficial to all involved (the consumer, the producer, and the sow). I believe a housing system that allows for stalls along with loose housing is the best for the sow, and the industry in the long run. We can debate the welfare issues all we want, but the simple fact is 100% stall housing is a welfare issue no longer acceptable with consumers. If producers do not want to see a total ban on stalls, then efforts must be made now to show loose housing, with the availability of stalls, is positive for the welfare of the sow. Through research data and a proactive attitude, a new welfare code of practice could be put in place without a total stall ban that is accepted by everyone. Producers, producer groups, the Canadian Pork Council, federal and provincial agriculture ministries need to come together and address this issue before it is too late.

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