

PRACTICAL MANAGEMENT OF THE TRANSITION TO BATCH FARROWING

**Dennis Aarts
Aarden Farms Ltd.
196709 19th Line, RR#1 Lakeside, Ontario N0M 2G0
E-mail: aardenfarms@quadro.net**

ABSTRACT

Aarden Farms is a 250 sow farrow to finish operation. We farm 400 acres of grain crops and 35 acres of fresh market produce in Oxford County. In November 2007 we made the decision to slightly reduce the sow herd, which provided a good opportunity to transition to batch farrowing. We are now operating with 54 farrowing stalls in a four-week batch cycle with a goal of 46+ farrowings per batch. Realizing that all farms and managers are different, we will be discussing different options, the pros and cons of batch farrowing, and our transition to it.

POSITIVES OF BATCH FARROWING

- Grouping larger numbers of piglets together for sale or non continuous flow finishing barns. Many weaner buyers look for larger groups of pigs so that entire barns can be filled at once. Batching can open new markets for smaller producers who need larger numbers by multiplying their weekly production by the length of the batch.
- Time management efficiencies. For example, by breeding sows once every four weeks in a larger group instead of smaller groups every week, you will actually spend much less time completing the work in total.
- Increase in monitored farrowings. When four weeks of farrowings happens on one day as opposed to four days, it is easy to schedule help to ensure that the majority of the farrowings have someone there to assist, if required.
- Specialized labour sharing and scheduling. Batch farrowers could get together and hire farrowing room technicians that could be shared amongst different farms. Smaller farms that require part time help can schedule help to come long in advance, for worthwhile amounts of time.

CHALLENGES WITH BATCH FARROWING

- Transitioning gilts into a batch. Since there is no guarantee when a gilt will be bred, it is always a concern how to get gilts into one of the barns batches.

- Transitioning repeats and open sows that are not culls into the batch.
Since these sows don't always breed with the main batch it is always a concern as to how to get these sows into the barns batches.
- Added cost of hormones.
Using a hormone (Regumate) to hold sows to fit into a batch has a cost.
- Increased nonproductive sow days (NPD).
Whenever you have sows on Regumate that is a NPD.
- Barn limitations.
If your breeding area is designed to handle 10 to 15 sows at once, and you now have over 40 sows to breed at once, adjustments need to be made.

TRANSITIONING TO BATCHES

The length of batch will depend upon the goals of batching as well as the desired age of weaned pigs. Common batch lengths are 2, 3 and 4 week batches. Making the change to batch farrowing is greatly simplified when a farm is going through a herd depop, reduction in herd size or a new set up since you have excess farrowing stalls to work with. If there are extra farrowing stalls, you have the ability to leave sows with the piglets longer. You can then wean them as well as some sows slightly earlier than you normally would and create a batch of sows. This would be ideal for a shorter batch but for those who are running at near capacity or looking at a longer batch, the use of a hormone (Regumate) to delay estrus is required. The use of Regumate will allow you to wean sows but put off breeding them until the rest of the sows in the desired batch are weaned. Regumate is an effective tool in the transition to batching but also very useful for fitting gilts and sows into the desired batch. Keeping in mind that there will be a small percentage of sows that don't perfectly fit in the batch, it is recommended that once batching that there is a small excess of farrowing stalls over the targets to accommodate these overages.

CONCLUSIONS

Batch farrowing is an excellent way to manage a sow barn, however, a manager needs to adapt slightly from traditional methods. It is not complicated and opens new opportunities for many producers. The tools and practices are available to manage this system effectively; however the trick is to keep extra costs to a minimum and to make the most of the advantages.