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Economics of sow gestation housing

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Cargill Pork

Pork producers, swine veterinarians, food retailers, animal welfare experts, animal welfare advocates, meat processors, and the general public share a common goal that animals used in pork production be cared for in a manner that provides for their health and welfare. The difficulty comes in agreeing on the definition of welfare. In Europe the government is defining welfare and setting rules and regulations to provide what they consider minimal welfare. In the USA food retailers and restaurant chains are adopting animal welfare guidelines, which set minimum standards for the producers supplying their products.

Animal welfare guidelines recently released by NCCR and FMI state that one of the most challenging issues faced by the pork industry is confinement of gestating sows. A strict interpretation of the following (from FMI-NCCR Animal Welfare Report, June 2002) could require a large portion of the US swine industry to convert to pen gestation or larger stalls:

Current pork industry guidelines include several enhancements regarding sow stalls, but our experts have challenged the industry to go further.

- 1) The pregnant sow should be able to lie down on her side without her teats extending into the adjacent stall. (Should not be achieved by compressing the udder with a wall, bar, or other barrier.)
- 2) Her head should not have to rest on a raised feeder.
- 3) Her rear quarters should not be in contact with the back of the stall.
- 4) The pregnant sow should be able to stand up unimpeded.

Many of the changes required to comply with the guidelines will have direct or indirect economic implications. New construction built to comply with sow housing requirements will not present nearly the challenge that conversion of existing facilities which have individually housed sows. It appears that sow housing requirements may be a moving target. Costs incurred to comply with current recommendations may not be fully recouped before more aggressive standards are introduced.

There are several factors to consider when retrofitting a stall or tether gestation facility to pen gestation.

- Construction materials, labor, and design
- Pen size

- Waste removal
- Mechanics of conversion without depopulation
- Feeding system
 - Electronic feeder
 - Drop feeder (trough or floor)
 - Hand feeding (trough or floor)
 - Trickle feeder
- Walkways
- Management and labor requirements
 - Individual care and nutrition
 - How to handle rebreeds
 - Organization of gestating area
 - + Age and body condition
 - + Stage of pregnancy
 - Mixing of animals
 - Movement of animals
- Production costs
 - Increased non-productive days
 - Decreased production per sow
 - Increased sow culling and mortality
 - Decreased sow inventory capacity

I believe there will be new costs added into the pork chain as a result of the sow gestation requirements. Packers will require producers to certify their animals are produced from sows housed in a specific type of facility. The carcasses and products will have to be segregated based on this and perhaps other criteria. The customer will audit packer and source farms to verify compliance. These will be new costs in the chain and this will result in decreased profit unless the product receives a higher price. It will be easier to audit and deal with larger production systems. This will drive further consolidation of the pork industry.

With this procedure in place, I expect other issues to be bundled with animal welfare—such as antibiotic use, food safety, environmental practices, etc. Pork produced in a system meeting standards in all of these and perhaps other areas could command a premium.

University researchers and production companies are studying different housing systems and how they influence welfare and production. I hope this issue can be resolved by science and logic, not just emotion, so the result is truly the best conditions for the animal.

