

The Little Pig's House

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Historically, pigs were the first farm animal to be subjected to extremely intensive housing and management, a trend that has greatly accelerated over the years. Over 90 percent of pigs are raised in some kind of confinement. At the same time, swine are almost universally considered the most intelligent of farm animals (Rollins, 1995) consisting of complex behavioural patterns. For this reason, in regard to production, some understandable issues have been brought forward to address the behavioural and physical welfare of these animals, thus questioning the confinement conditions under which they are placed.

Confinement systems such as tethering, gestation stalls and farrowing crates are a great welfare concern because many of the needs of the animals are not being met, violating one or more of the five freedoms of animals revised by the Farm Animal Welfare Council in 1993. Though inhumane these systems are very effective in that they allow a great many sows to be housed in an environmentally controlled situation, fed and cared for by a minimal labour force, and maintained with minimal feed, for energy is not wasted on thermoregulation or movement (Rollin, 1995). Naturally, the public is concerned with the freedom of movement of the animals. Because consumers see these conditions as inhumane, producers are forced to modify their existing systems. As agriculturists we know, "perception is reality". This has already been the case in Europe. The European Commission of Pig Welfare has recently banned gestation stalls, applying the ban to all new operations since January 1, 2003 and all existing operations by January 1, 2013. The European public has called for loose housing conditions.

The problems that occur with sows housed under intensive conditions include fracturing and other foot and leg problems because of minimal movement, urinary tract disease because the animals are forced to lie in their own excrement, and delay in estrus (Rollin, 1995). Farrowing sows may experience dystocia, agalactia and wasting disease. Loose housing eradicates most of these problems mentioned. However, it has its disadvantages. Producers that raise their sows in loose housing conditions, particularly on straw, experience problems with worms, coccidiosis, lice and mange, mycotoxins, and swine dysentery. Behavioural problems include vulva biting and bullying.

Dr. Connor of the University of Manitoba says that "the industry does tend to be interested, but there is no great move [to group sow housing] at present." John Maltman, Swine Specialist with Manitoba Agriculture & Food expressed that obtaining financing from banks (when they are not familiar with a new system); labour requirements and aggression as challenges for group housing. Kelly Lund of Alberta Food and Rural Development in her 2002 welfare review states that when considering individual feed control, levels of aggression, ability to manage successful production, cost, ease of implementation in new or retrofit facilities, group systems based on ESF (electric sow feeders) are recommended at the present time as the most suitable for Alberta producers

making the transition to group housing. Dr. Harold Gonyou, Prairie Swine Centre, has seen an increased interest in group housing using **Electronic Sow Feeders (ESF)**.

“Less than a tenth of 1% of barns were using ESF two years ago. Now about 2% of the Canadian herd is using ESF.” Both researchers agree that the drive for more welfare-oriented sow housing systems will continue to grow.

The issue of welfare is having a substantial impact on the agricultural sector of today. Consumers are becoming more conscious of their environment and our limited resources. This state of mind has brought about both Animal Welfare laws and on the extreme side of the spectrum, Animal Rights supporters who reject all animal use. The issue of farrowing crates, gestation stalls and tethering, it seems, is being addressed at a very slow pace in North America. However, on November 5, 2002, Florida voters approved a state constitutional amendment to prohibit commercial hog producers from housing pregnant sows in gestation stalls. It is inevitable that the European consumers' concerns will intensify the North American concerns, forcing the North American Agricultural sectors to comply to their demands of better treatment of these animals. Thus, gestation stalls, farrowing crates and tethering will be eradicated. It is up to us as agriculturalist to be ready when this happens.