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## **THE SCIENTIFIC CASE AGAINST SOW GESTATION CRATES AND THE TETHERING OF SOWS**

### **B R I E F I N G**

The pig industry in fact consists of two different herds, each with their own function. Breeding sows are kept not for their meat, but so that they can produce as many piglets as possible. The role of the young pigs is to produce meat; they are reared to the age of 4-6 months when they are slaughtered.

### **BREEDING SOWS**

Many sows are kept in gestation crates or tether crates. Gestation crates are metal-barred stalls which are so narrow that the sow cannot even turn round. Sows are confined in these stalls throughout their 16½ week pregnancy – and for pregnancy after pregnancy. This means that the sows are imprisoned in this way for most of their adult lives.

Tether crates are a variation of gestation crates. Here, there is no back to the crate; so, to prevent the sow from escaping, she is tethered to the ground by a heavy metal chain.

The use of gestation crates and tethers has been illegal, on cruelty grounds, in the UK since 1st January 1999. The EU Pigs Directive (91/630/EC) requires tethers to be phased out by 2006 and, in an amendment agreed on 19th June 2001, it prohibits gestation crates as from 2013. It requires pregnant sows to be kept in groups from that date.

As indicated earlier, the central point about a gestation crate is that it is so narrow that the sow cannot turn round. Gestation crates have been condemned in a major report on the Welfare of Intensively Kept Pigs produced in 1997 by the European Commission's Scientific Veterinary Committee (SVC). The SVC concluded that:

“No individual pen should be used which does not allow the sow to turn around easily”.

The SVC also stressed that “sows should preferably be kept in groups” because “overall welfare appears to be better when sows are not confined throughout gestation”.

The principal conclusions that emerge from the scientific literature are as follows:

1. **Health problems** It is impossible for sows kept in crates or tethers to move or exercise. As a result, as compared with sows housed in groups, sows kept in crates or tethers have weaker bones and muscles, a poorer level of cardiovascular fitness and a higher incidence of health disorders such as lameness and urinary tract infections.
2. **Prevention of natural behaviours** Sows have a strong instinct for exploring a complex environment, rooting in earth and manipulating material such as straw. These natural behaviours are impossible for sows kept in crates or tethers.
3. **Prevention of natural social behaviour** Sows also have a strong preference for living in a social group; social contact is impossible for sows confined in crates or tethers.
4. **Stereotypies** This highly repetitive behaviour, performed for no apparent purpose, is frequently observed in crated and tethered sows and is a major indicator of poor welfare.
5. **Abnormal inactivity and unresponsiveness** Abnormal inactivity and unresponsiveness is very widespread in confined sows. The SVC stressed that this indicates that welfare is poor.

Scientific research shows that gestation crates and tethers inflict a range of health and welfare problems on sows:

#### Activity and exploration of environment

The SVC stressed that sows devote time and energy to exploring their environment and seeking diversity in that environment. They root in earth and manipulate materials such as straw; pigs will work for access to earth and bedding for manipulation as well as for lying. Such activities are impossible for crated and tethered sows: there is very little space in crate and tether systems for any kind of movement or activity; moreover, in crate and tether systems sows are usually given no straw or any other kind of material to manipulate or lie on. The SVC stressed that “sow welfare will be worse in conditions where exploration of a complex environment, rooting in a soft substratum and manipulation of materials such as straw are not possible, than in conditions where they are possible”.

## Lack of exercise

Crated and tethered sows clearly have very little exercise, which leads to the following problems:

1. Lack of exercise is associated with weakened bones. The SVC pointed out that crated sows have leg bones which are only two-thirds of the strength of those of group-housed sows.
2. Lack of exercise is also associated with crated and tethered sows being prone to leg injuries and lameness. This is partly because of the weakened bones which are inherent in crate and tether systems. Lameness is also associated with the fact that sows confined in crates or tethers are kept on concrete floors. Sows kept on concrete have a higher incidence of injuries to feet, inflammatory swellings of joints and abrasions to their skin than other sows.
3. The SVC pointed out that lack of exercise in crated or tethered sows leads to a reduction in the mass of some muscles which are particularly concerned with locomotion so that several of these are smaller than in group-housed sows. This affects the ability to lie down.
4. The SVC stated that another consequence of lack of exercise is that the level of cardiovascular fitness in crated sows is less than in group-housed sows. This is because sows kept in crates or tethers use their cardiovascular system less. The SVC stressed that this is significant because many pigs which die during transport are diagnosed as having cardiovascular problems.

## Physical discomfort

No bedding is provided in crate and tether systems; instead the sows are forced to stand or lie on a concrete floor. Professor John Webster, Head of the Veterinary School at Bristol University in the UK, has noted that sows forced to lie on concrete can suffer from excessive heat loss and from chronic physical discomfort, especially around the bony joints of the knees and hocks.

## Social contact

The SVC pointed out that sows have a strong preference for social companions. Sows prefer to have social contact with other pigs and they associate and interact in a friendly way much more than in an aggressive way. Social contact is clearly impossible for sows confined in crates and tethers.

## Stereotypies

Stereotypies are frequently observed in crated and tethered sows and are a major indicator of poor welfare. Stereotypic behaviour is highly repetitive behaviour, performed for no apparent purpose. The SVC stated that stereotypies such as bar-biting, sham-chewing and tongue-rolling have been reported by many authors as occurring in many sows confined in crates or tethers. They added that such behaviour is extremely rare in sows kept in complex environments. The SVC pointed out that stereotypies indicate that the animal is having difficulty in coping with its environment and hence that its welfare is poor.

The SVC stated that stereotypies are a characteristic behaviour of sows confined in a small space, typically in crates or tethers, with little complexity in their environment and little possibility for the sow to regulate her interactions with all aspects of her environment. Stereotypies result both from the sow being confined in a crate or by a tether and from the fact that in such systems she is usually given no manipulable material such as straw.

## Abnormal inactivity and unresponsiveness

The SVC stated that abnormal inactivity and unresponsiveness is very widespread in confined sows as compared with sows in environments where they have opportunity for exercise and exploration. The SVC stressed that since the extent of the inactivity and unresponsiveness in crated and tethered sows indicates abnormal behaviour, “the sows may well be depressed in the clinical sense and poor welfare is indicated”.

## Urinary infections

Urinary tract infections are more common in crated or tethered sows than in sows which are not confined during pregnancy. This high incidence of urinary infections is associated with the low levels of activity imposed on sows kept in crates or tethers. These low levels of activity seem to be associated with infrequent drinking. As a result, confined sows urinate less frequently than animals which are not closely confined. The consequent build-up of bacteria within the urinary tract leads to increased levels of infection. It is, moreover, thought that another reason why closely confined sows are more prone to urinary infections is that they have to lie, or sit, in their faeces.

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