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THE WELFARE OF PIGS

B R I E F I N G

Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) believes the following steps are needed to ensure reasonable welfare standards for pigs.

1. Sow stalls (also known as “gestation crates”) and the tethering of sows should be prohibited (these systems have been prohibited in the European Union).
2. Pigs should be given sufficient space to prevent overcrowding.
3. Pigs should be provided with bedding material, preferably straw.
4. Castration and routine tail-docking and teeth-clipping should be prohibited.

BREEDING SOWS

Sow stalls (gestation crates) are so narrow that the sow cannot even turn round. She is kept like this throughout her 16-week pregnancy – and for pregnancy after pregnancy. In other words, for most of her adult life.

In their 1997 Report the European Union’s (EU) Scientific Veterinary Committee (SVC) condemned sow stalls/gestation crates, concluding that:

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

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

Scientific research shows that, as compared with sows housed in groups, sows kept in stalls/crates have weaker bones and muscles, a poorer level of cardiovascular fitness and a higher incidence of lameness, inflammatory swellings of joints and urinary tract infections.

Moreover, stereotypic behaviour (e.g. bar-biting) is common in sows confined in stalls/crates. This highly repetitive behaviour is a major indicator of poor welfare. The SVC also stated that abnormal inactivity and unresponsiveness is very widespread in confined sows and that *“the sows may well be depressed in the clinical sense”*.

Producers assert that sows kept in groups can be aggressive to each other at feeding and when new animals join the group. Scientific research has established that aggression can largely be prevented:

?? if the feeding system is designed to minimise competition for food. For example, in the trickle feeder system, food is delivered a bit at a time into individual feeders. Providing the food in a slow trickle discourages a sow from eating her meal quickly and then trying to take food from another.

Alternatively, food can be scattered into the straw by hand or by ‘dump-feeders’: automated dispensers fitted near the ceiling. The sows root around in the straw for their food; this keeps them occupied, exercising their natural tendency to spend much time rooting for food. Finally, the electronic sow feeding (ESF) system can be used. A transponder attached to her ear allows the sow to enter a feeding station which is locked behind her to protect her while she feeds.

?? by keeping the group as stable as possible, in that sows are returned to the same group after farrowing and new animals are brought in only when necessary.

?? by introducing environmental complexity, and

?? by giving the sows sufficient space.

Sow stalls/gestation crates have already been prohibited in the UK and Sweden and, under the EU’s 2001 Pigs Directive, will be illegal in the EU as a whole from 2013. The tethering of sows is also already prohibited in some EU Member States and will be illegal throughout the EU from 2006. (Unfortunately the EU ban will still allow farmers to keep sows in stalls/crates for the first 4 weeks of the pregnancy. CIWF is campaigning for the law to be changed so that stalls/crates are banned throughout the pregnancy.)

FATTENING PIGS (i.e. the pigs reared for their meat, as opposed to the breeding sows)

Scientific research shows that in natural conditions pigs spend 75% of their daylight hours in activity – rooting, foraging and exploring. None of these activities are possible for many of today’s pigs, the majority of which are factory farmed in many countries. They are kept indoors throughout their lives in barren, overcrowded, often dirty pens. The principal problems include:

Overcrowding

The SVC recommended that pigs should be given around 50% more space than is required by the EU Pigs Directive. In particular, pigs should be given sufficient space to enable all to lie at the same time in lateral recumbency.

Lack of straw

Pigs should be provided with straw or some other bedding/manipulable material. The SVC emphasised the importance of straw in providing:

- ?? An outlet for chewing and rooting behaviour. Destructive behaviours like tail-biting are reduced by straw.
- ?? Physical and thermal comfort.
- ?? Dietary fibre.

Many pigs are given no straw or other bedding material, but instead are forced to live on bare concrete or slatted or perforated floors; this can lead to lameness or other injuries. Moreover, the lack of straw, combined with the overcrowding, prevents the pigs from performing their natural behaviours. In order to find an outlet for these frustrated instincts, they sometimes turn to the only other ‘thing’ in their pens – the tails of other pigs. Out of boredom they begin to chew and then bite each other’s tails.

Tail-docking

In order to prevent tail-biting, most farmers dock their piglets’ tails with pliers or a hot docking iron. The SVC stressed that docking is likely to be painful when carried out and sometimes leads “*to prolonged pain*”. The SVC concluded that the proper way to prevent tail-biting is not to dock the piglets’ tails, but to keep the animals in good conditions. They stressed that:

“The problems of injury following tail biting should be solved by improved management rather than by tail docking”.

The SVC made it clear that tail-biting can largely be prevented by keeping pigs at a stocking density which is not too high, and by providing straw or other manipulable materials and an adequate diet and sufficient water. Avoiding high levels of dust, ammonia and carbon dioxide is also important in preventing tail-biting. Moreover, aggressive pigs should immediately be removed from the group.

New EU laws

The EU 2001 Pigs Directive provides that as from 2003:

- ?? pigs must be provided with sufficient straw or other similar material to enable them properly to carry out their natural exploratory and rooting behaviours, and
- ?? routine tail-docking is prohibited. The Directive states that before carrying out tail-docking, other measures must be taken to prevent tail-biting and, in particular, inadequate environmental conditions or management systems must be changed.

Castration

In many countries male pigs are castrated to avoid ‘boar taint’. The SVC stressed that *“castration causes severe pain and distress”*. CIWF believes that the castration of pigs should be prohibited. (In practice, castration is very rarely carried out in the UK.)

Teeth-clipping

Many piglets’ teeth are clipped to prevent them damaging the sow’s udder and the faces of litter mates as they compete for teats. The SVC condemned this practice, stating that *“It seems unlikely that the causing of pain in every tooth of every piglet could be justified by the relatively minor advantages which occur [from] the practice”*.

The risk of damage to the sow’s udder has arisen because the modern sow has been bred to have litters of as many as 10 - 12 piglets, whereas in nature wild pigs would have just 4 - 5 piglets. A litter of this size would be much less likely to damage the sow’s udder than one of 10 - 12 piglets. Thus the danger of piglets damaging the sow’s udder has arisen largely because sows have been selectively bred to produce large litters. The industry’s solution to this problem is to clip piglets’ teeth. Surely

the proper approach would be to reverse the breeding process and return to producing sows who have smaller litters.

Selective breeding

Selective breeding has been used to produce pigs who have faster growth rates and heavier muscle development. Pigs' legs are simply unable to keep pace with the body's growth rate. As a result, an increasing number of pigs are suffering from painful joint and leg problems.

Pigs are also growing too fast for their heart and lungs. This leads to cardiovascular inadequacy which results in even young pigs sometimes having heart attacks and dying during transport.

Hunger

The selection of pigs for rapid growth and large muscle blocks means that sows would suffer from the detrimental effects of obesity if they were allowed to eat normally.

To keep their weight down, they are fed on restricted diets. The SVC said that pregnant sows are usually given much less food than they would choose to consume and this results in the animals being "hungry throughout much of their lives". CIWF believes it is totally unacceptable for animals to be kept in a state of long-term hunger. We welcome the new provision in the EU 2001 Pigs Directive that provides that, in order to satisfy their hunger, pregnant sows must be given a sufficient quantity of bulky or high-fibre food as well as high-energy food.

PETER STEVENSON

Political and Legal Director

Compassion in World Farming

peter@ciwf.co.uk