

PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVES TO SOW STALLS FOR BREEDING PIGS IN EUROPE



At any one time around 6 million breeding sows in Europe are kept caged in sow stalls. These stalls are so narrow that the sow cannot even turn round. She is kept like this throughout her 16½-week pregnancy. And for pregnancy after pregnancy. In short, for most of her adult life. The science is clear in condemning this system on cruelty grounds.

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Sow in stall

Sow stalls have already been banned in Sweden and the UK. They have also been prohibited in Finland, the Netherlands and Denmark; their bans come into force in 2006, 2008 and 2014 respectively.

Opponents of a ban on sow stalls assert that sows housed in groups can be aggressive and that only stalls can prevent fighting. They also claim that keeping sows in humane alternative systems is uneconomic. These assertions are not true, as can be seen from the fact that 4 million EU sows are already housed successfully in alternatives, either in groups indoors or free range.

NO NEED FOR AGGRESSION IN GROUPS

The 1997 report by the EU Scientific Veterinary Committee (SVC) stressed that group housing systems can be designed and managed so as to prevent aggression. The key factors in this include: eliminating competition at feeding time; keeping the group as stable as possible (e.g. by bringing in new sows only when necessary); providing straw or some other manipulable material; avoiding overcrowding; and feeding bulkier food to prevent hunger. The SVC stressed that “systems such as [these], which are working well in common practice, are available”.

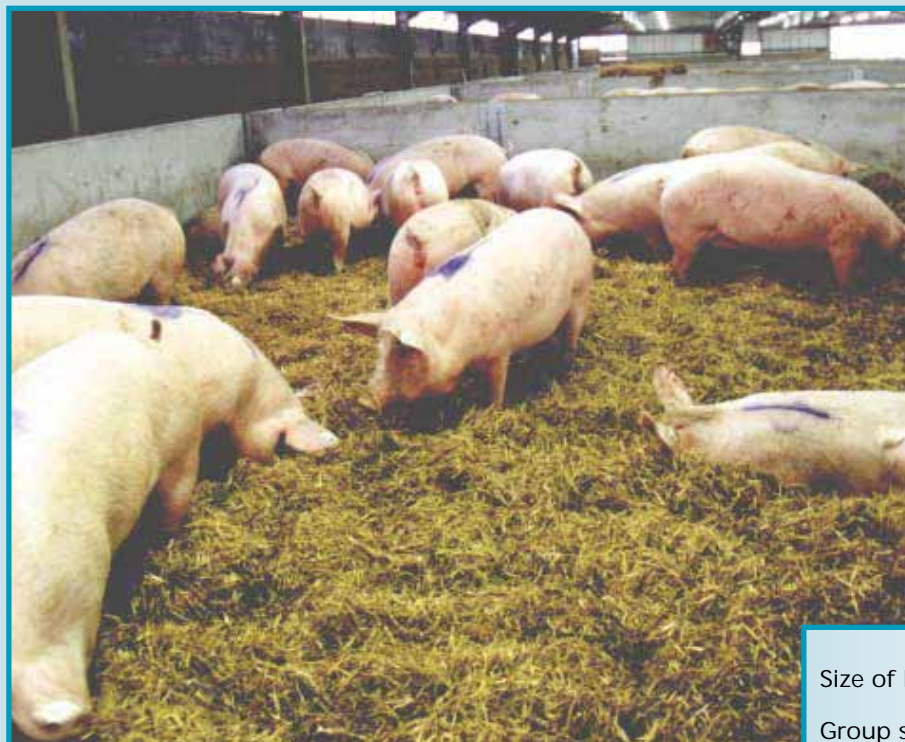
HUMANE SYSTEMS ARE ECONOMICALLY VIABLE

The European Commission’s recent report points out that, as regards investment, some forms of group housing are cheaper than sow stalls. The Commission adds that overall pig production costs (i.e. including both building and running costs) are also lower in some group housing systems than with sow stalls. Figures from France, Holland and the UK show that even in the better group housing systems – ones giving reasonable space and ample straw – a kg. of pigmeat costs less than 0.03 Euro more (less than 3 Irish pence or 2 UK pence) to produce than in sow stalls.

As EU consumers each eat on average 42 kg. of pigmeat a year, banning sow stalls and replacing them with one of the better group housing systems would add just over 1 Euro (about Irish £1 or just under Sterling £1) a year to each person’s food bill.

EXAMPLES OF KINDER ALTERNATIVES TO SOW STALLS

Here we offer some examples of alternative systems. In each case, problems of undue aggression between sows kept in groups have been solved. What's more, productivity – the number of piglets produced per sow per year – has been found to be the same if not higher in group housing systems compared to stalls. The following examples show that well designed and well managed alternative housing systems not only work, but also work well.



When housed indoors in groups, sows are generally given separate areas for lying, feeding and dunging. To get the highest standards of welfare out of this system, bedding material, such as straw, should be provided. This is used by the sows not only for lying on, but also to root around in and explore.

INDOOR HOUSING WITH DUMP-FEEDER SYSTEM, NORFOLK, UK

This herd of 1,300 sows in the heart of England's Breckland region is kept indoors in groups of about 60 animals on straw. Food is scattered into the straw by 'dump-feeders': automated dispensers fitted near the ceiling. The sows then root around busily for their meal. This keeps the sows occupied and exercises their natural tendency to spend much time rooting for food. Sows are usually fed concentrated feeds, which by themselves provide for the sows' nutritional needs

but do not usually satisfy hunger. This can add to tensions at feeding time. Providing straw gives the sow a means of adding bulk to her diet, thereby helping to satisfy feelings of hunger that can otherwise be a factor leading to aggression.

Cleaning out on this farm is a simple weekly operation. The dunging passage for the whole shed is scraped through with a tractor-type vehicle, the muck being pushed straight out of the building.

Size of herd:	1,300 breeding sows
Group size:	60 sows
Overall stocking density:	2.5m ² floor space per sow
Herd dynamics:	Sows kept in stable groups (animals not mixed at all)
Feeder system:	Dump-feeder
Floor type:	Concrete with straw-covered lying area
Average culling age of sows:	After 9-10 parities (pregnancies)

'PORC DU MAINE' SYSTEM, FRANCE

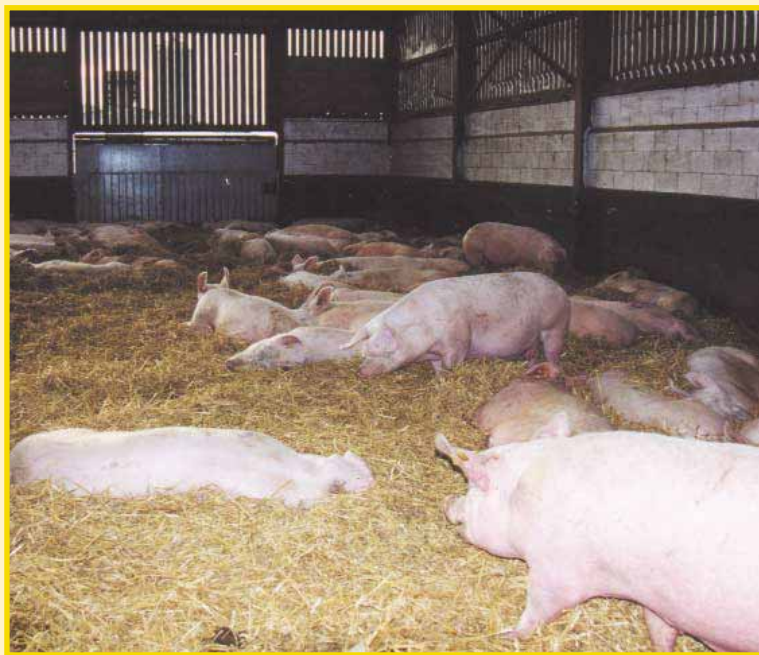
Two farms were visited, each using the same system comprising small groups of sows housed indoors in straw-bedded pens. 6-8 sows are kept in each stable group (i.e. not mixed throughout their pregnancy cycle). The floor of the straw-covered lying areas is set at a slight slope, causing the bedding to move slowly through gravity to the central dunging passage. The lying area therefore virtually cleans itself, cutting down on the amount of labour involved in running the farms. Feeding is done by hand, with food being scattered amongst the straw. This promotes foraging among the sows which helps prevent aggression.



Size of herd:	Two herds of 100 & 150 sows
Group size:	6-8 sows
Overall stocking density:	3 m ² floor space per sow
Herd dynamics:	Stable groups rotated from pen to pen around house
Feeder system:	Hand fed using the dump-feed principle
Floor type:	Slightly sloping concrete floors with straw bedding

INDOOR HOUSING WITH ELECTRONIC SOW FEEDER SYSTEM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, UK

This 450-sow herd was previously kept in narrow confinement stalls until the practice was banned recently by UK legislation. The farmer admits that, when the animals were in stalls, he had "more lame sows in a month than in the group system in 12 months". This is testimony to the fitter, healthier animal produced by group housing. This farmer also finds that productivity is higher in the group house, with over 23 pigs being produced per sow per year, compared with 22.5 pigs previously in his stall house.



Size of herd:	450 sows
Group size:	100 - 235 sows
Overall stocking density:	2.45 m ² floor space per sow
Herd dynamics:	Dynamic herd where 15% new sows added weekly
Feeder system:	Electronic sow feeder (ESF)
Floor type:	Concrete with deep bedded straw lying area
Average culling age of sows:	More parities (pregnancies) per sow in group house than previously in stalls

The lying area is covered with a deep bed of straw. Feeding is carried out using the electronic sow feeding (ESF) system. Each sow has an individual computer transponder attached to her ear. The ESF's computer recognises each animal as an individual as she enters the system and can give a feed ration tailored to her needs.

DUTCH INDOOR SYSTEM, SOEST, NETHERLANDS

This Dutch farm has overcome the problem of sows not being able to satisfy their hunger from standard meals consisting of concentrated feed. Here the group housed sows are offered food that is specially formulated to include vegetable pulp, making it more bulky and therefore more satisfying. This helps prevent outbreaks of aggression between hungry sows at feeding time.



INDOOR HOUSING WITH TRICKLE FEED SYSTEM, SUFFOLK, UK

Another straw-based system where the sows are kept in small groups. Feeding is carried out using the trickle feeder system, whereby food is delivered a bit at a time into individual feeders. Providing the food in a slow trickle discourages a greedy sow from eating her meal quickly then trying to steal food from another. Just as she thinks her food is finished, a little more trickles down and regains her interest!

Size of herd:	1,100 breeding sows
Group size:	8 sows
Overall stocking density:	2.5m ² floor space per sow
Herd dynamics:	Stable groups
Feeder system:	Trickle feeder system
Floor type:	Slightly sloping concrete with straw-bedded lying area.

STRAW-BASED ALTERNATIVES IN SWEDEN

The majority of pregnant sows in Sweden are kept in groups of about 50 on a deep bed of straw. The sows are fed using feeding stalls. The sows freely enter the stalls and the segregation avoids any competition. These stalls are used only for feeding. The sows themselves usually divide their use of the house into separate lying and dunging areas. Each sow is allocated 2.5 m² of floor space.

OUTDOOR PIG KEEPING SYSTEM, SUFFOLK, UK

Outdoor pig keeping can give the animals a high standard of welfare. Sows are allowed to roam on a free-range basis with shelter being provided by huts or pig arcs. This system is cheaper to set up than indoor housing as the capital costs are about a third lower.

Size of herd:	800 sows
Group size:	6 sows per paddock
Overall stocking density:	9 sows per acre
Herd dynamics:	Stable groups
Feeder system:	Ground fed sow rolls
Bedding type:	Straw provided in pig arcs

The Suffolk breeding herd featured is situated on 2 outdoor sites as part of a rotation system with arable crops. The rotation allows the land to be rested and re-established with grass, helping to promote a disease-free environment.

CIWF TRUST'S BELIEF:
CIWF Trust believes that the sow stall system for keeping pregnant pigs should be phased out throughout the EU.

Breeding sows should instead be kept outdoors, or indoors in groups using loose-housed systems and wherever possible, straw or other suitable bedding material should be provided.



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