

PIGS

Current situation

Pigs are active, intelligent and inquisitive animals. They form stable social structures where little aggressive behaviour is observed. Within a group, pigs will communicate vocally, nose one another and often lie together. They spend a great deal of time rooting in the ground for food and chewing vegetation, even when plenty of food is available. They have limited sweating abilities and so rely on wallowing to cool down in hot weather. When conditions are cold, they huddle together with others or in a sheltered place. Pregnant sows in the wild leave the herd a day or two before farrowing (giving birth). They have a strong nest building instinct, particularly in the 24 hours before the piglets are born. They may investigate solid food from four weeks of age, but in the wild the normal weaning age is 13-19 weeks.

Pig farms are usually divided into those which keep sow or breeding herds, and those which keep fattening or finishing herds. A few carry out both activities. Most pigs are kept indoors in varying degrees of confinement. They have also been subject to considerable genetic selection, through conventional breeding, for fat reduction and higher feed conversion rates. Long-term selection for faster growth and desirable carcass qualities is thought to be one factor which, combined with intensive management systems, has led to leg weakness in pigs.

Consumers in various countries have become increasingly interested in pig production methods. Opposition to the very intensive systems arose following outbreaks of swine fever and foot-and-mouth disease, which resulted in millions of pigs having to be slaughtered in the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and the UK. Animal welfare organisations have pioneered welfare-labelling systems in the UK, Germany, France, The Netherlands and Denmark. Some governments have also supported quality assurance schemes. Major supermarket chains such as Albert Heijn (NL) or TESCO and M&S (UK) promote pig meat from welfare-friendly production systems too.

Breeding Sows

In most pig breeding systems in common use, the pregnant sow is restrained in a narrow stall (sow or gestation stall) for most of her four month pregnancy (gestation). Such close confinement causes severe distress; the sow is unable to turn around, sleeping and dunging areas are not separated, and normal exercise and nest building are impossible. Exploratory and social behaviour is also denied. As a result, abnormal and repetitive stereotypic behaviour patterns can develop. Skeletal abnormalities and skin lesions on the limbs and body are commonplace. There may also be a higher rate of infection and an adverse effect on farrowing and piglet mortality at or during birth.

Farrowing crates, in which the sow is housed for the birth of her piglets and until they are weaned at 3-4 weeks of age, are equally restrictive, although they do provide some protection for the piglets by preventing the sow from accidentally lying on them.

Sows are often given food which is nutritiously adequate but does not include low-energy, filling, bulky food, which they need to perform their foraging behaviour. This was highlighted in a report from the European Food Safety Authority³² which concluded that factors affecting pig welfare include lack of foraging material especially for restrictively fed pigs that may lead to frustration and lack of bulky or high-fibre feed which is associated with frustration and pain due to stomach ulcers.

Fattening Pigs

Weaning and fattening pigs are kept separately on farms, but certain welfare problems apply to both. Most pig rearing systems still provide neither straw nor other bedding material. Floors which are fully slatted, or which have no bedding and therefore may be slippery, can also give rise to foot and leg injuries. Ammonia levels can be very high, especially in weaner accommodation. Overcrowding of pigs in many systems leads to aggression. The rearing of pigs in such conditions, without foraging or other manipulable material, can also contribute to outbreaks of tail biting. In order to prevent this abnormal behaviour occurring, piglets are often tail docked shortly after birth. Piglets may also be subjected to tooth clipping or grinding in order to prevent piglets injuring each other, and also to prevent damage to the sows' udders, which, as well as being painful, can lead to infection. Both tail docking and tooth modification are painful at the time they are carried out. Male piglets to be reared for meat are also routinely castrated in most European countries, in order to prevent boar taint and to reduce aggression and sexual behaviour. However, in countries such as the UK and Ireland, where pigs are slaughtered at a lighter weight, castration is not common as the risk of boar taint and aggression/sexual behaviour is reduced due to the early age.

The issue of piglet castration has become a major animal welfare concern and some countries have introduced plans to ban the procedure, like the Netherlands which will stop surgical castration by 2015. Some supermarket chains, like Colruyt in Belgium, have also decided to sell only products from pigs that have not been physically castrated from 1 January 2011 onwards. Furthermore the development of a possible animal welfare friendly alternative like immunocastration, which has been authorised for use in the EU since May 2009, has pushed the European Commission and the different stakeholders to think about how surgical castration can be avoided in the future and ongoing discussions are taking place between stakeholders to agree on the way forward.

Legislation

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe's *Recommendation concerning Pigs* was adopted in 1986 by the Standing Committee of the *European Convention for the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes*, which was subsequently updated in 2004. It deals in some detail with stockmanship and inspection by the farmer, buildings and equipment, herd management, physical procedures such as tail docking and castration, and special provisions for the various categories of pig (breeding boars, sows, piglets, and pigs kept for fattening or until maturity as breeding animals). It also recommends that research be done into the development of housing systems which allow for the behavioural needs of pigs, and in which sows are not tethered or closely confined.

European Union

Council Directive 2008/120/EC of 18 December 2008 laying down minimum standards for the protection of pigs has codified and repealed Council Directive 91/630/EEC which had been amended several times. The main requirements are a prohibition of tethering of sows (from January 2006) and the phasing out of the use of sow stalls. The construction of new sow stalls was prohibited from January 2003 and existing stalls will be banned from January 2013. Food is required to include sufficient bulky or high-fibre food to satisfy hunger. Fully slatted floors are forbidden for sows and bedding is

³²/Animal health and welfare aspects of different housing and husbandry systems for adult breeding boars, pregnant, farrowing sows and unweaned piglets[1] - Scientific Opinion of the Panel on Animal Health and Welfare. <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/scdocs/scdoc/572.htm>

to be provided. Fattening pigs may still be kept on totally slatted floors with high stocking density but some form of environmental enrichment is compulsory. Tail-docking may not be carried out routinely. Castration without anaesthetic can only be performed until seven days of live by a veterinarian or a trained person.

The Panel on Animal Health and Animal Welfare of the European Food Safety Authority, adopted in 2007 a series of reports which included recommendations on space allowances and floor types for weaner and fattening pigs, castration, tail docking, and the housing and husbandry of breeding pigs³³. These reports will feed into a review of the European legislation on pig welfare, which is awaited.

National legislation

Since 1999, the use of individual sow stalls and tethers has been prohibited in the UK, and in Denmark pregnant sows in existing systems have to be kept unrestrained in loose housing systems for some two-thirds of the gestation period. In the Netherlands, space allowances have been increased for sows and for finishing pigs. In Sweden, sow stalls are also prohibited, as well as the use of conventional farrowing crates, fully slatted floors are prohibited and foraging material must be provided. Finland introduced a ban on sow stalls which came into effect in 2006.

Action needed

- The Commission should urgently come forward with proposals to amend the Pigs Directive with particular emphasis on providing better conditions for fattening pigs and on finding alternatives to the castration of piglets and to farrowing crates.
- Further research into and development of improved farrowing systems, which are both sow and piglet friendly is needed.
- A particular effort must be made by national authorities on enforcement, to ensure that the legislative requirements are complied with, as multiple reports of Food and Veterinary Offices show repetitive infringements of the Directive in most Member States.

³³/Animal health and welfare aspects of different housing and husbandry systems for adult breeding boars, pregnant, farrowing sows and unweaned piglets: http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/efsa_locale-1178620753812_1178655708740.htm

Opinion of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare on a request from the Commission related to animal health and welfare in fattening pigs in relation to housing and husbandry: http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/efsa_locale-1178620753812_1178654659432.htm

Opinion of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) on a request from the Commission related to welfare of weaners and rearing pigs: effects of different space allowances and floor types: http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/efsa_locale-1178620753812_1178620774303.htm