

The Welfare of Pigs in Canada

Intensive Sow Housing

Confinement in Gestation Stalls and Farrowing Crates

Most sows (female breeding pigs) in North America are kept in gestation stalls and/or farrowing crates for the majority of their lives.



Gestation stalls are a popular choice as they allow for increased control over individual feed intake and reduced early pregnancy losses. Farrowing crates are used to protect newborn piglets from being crushed when a sow lies down unexpectedly.

Gestation stalls are generally 26-28 inches wide by 7 feet long, with metal bars and cement floors. The sows can lie down, stand up or sit, and may be able to walk a few steps forward and back. However, they typically do not have enough room to turn around. Because they have very little control over their environment, they may experience stress from a number of factors, including: being housed next to an aggressive neighbour, inability to avoid a wet lying area or inability to avoid insects.

They are also deprived of the ability to express some important natural behaviours they are highly motivated to perform such as roaming, rooting, building nests and controlled interactions with other animals.

As a result, sows may develop:

- Abnormal behaviours called stereotypies (repetitive, fixed and apparently functionless behaviours such as bar-biting),
- Lameness (caused by joint inflammation and lesions from rubbing against concrete), and
- Chronic stress.

The pig industry does support research into the welfare of pigs in different housing systems, which is leading to some improvements in housing design.

Barren Environments

Pigs are intelligent, social animals. When they are housed in a barren environment they tend to exhibit abnormal, repetitive behaviours such as licking and chewing on metal bars, and if group-housed without enrichment, increased aggression like ear and tail biting. The bare slatted floor can also cause painful skin lesions. Improving the environment by providing relevant environmental enrichment or adding bedding substrates like straw, wood shavings or peat to the floor can make a big difference in improving the pigs' welfare.

Alternatives

Group gestation housing with good management can provide a more humane environment for sows. However, the social stress induced at various times can cause aggression (e.g. when unfamiliar animals are grouped together and at feeding times). Management practices such as selecting an appropriate group size, ensuring adequate space, and providing environmental enrichment may reduce the risk of aggression and decrease the incidence of abnormal, repetitive behaviours.

Alternative housing options for lactating sows and their piglets also exist, and improve the welfare of the pigs when they are designed to actually meet their behavioural needs. For example, sow-controlled housing enables a sow to leave her piglets when she wants to, and group-housing after several weeks of lactation minimizes the length of time the animals are kept in confinement. In addition to the benefit of reducing sow stress, it has been suggested that piglets develop better social skills when raised in an enriched environment rather than in barren pens.

Welfare of Piglets

Weaning

In commercial hog production, piglets are weaned from the mother abruptly at a much younger age than would naturally occur. This practice causes significant stress for both the sow and piglets. Further, an increase in inappropriate behaviour between litter-mates has been observed in early-weaned piglets.

Teeth Clipping

Piglets are born with sharp needle teeth which are used to establish dominance among littermates. These teeth can cause significant injuries to litter-mates as well as to the teats of the sow during suckling. To prevent these injuries the piglets' sharp needle teeth are commonly clipped soon after birth. Complete clipping of the tooth is painful and can lead to infection. However, grinding or clipping off just the tip can serve as a less invasive alternative.



Tail Docking

Piglets are motivated to suckle and chew and without appropriate enrichment materials available to direct these behaviours towards, they commonly chew on each others' tails. In order to prevent injuries and infections that result, piglets' tails are routinely cut off at a young age. This painful procedure is not generally performed with an anesthetic. Piglets that are provided with suitable environmental enrichment have an outlet for their chewing behaviours and therefore perform less tail biting.

Castration

Male piglets are castrated within the first week of life for meat quality purposes, generally without the use of any pain control. The procedure causes pain and stress, which can be minimized by using local anesthetics and analgesics in different combinations.

Transport

Presently in Canada, the Federal Animal Transportation Regulations permit pigs to be transported for as long as 36 hours without food, water or rest.

There are many other factors besides journey times that make transportation stressful for pigs. Loading and mixing of pigs on the truck are considered to be the most stressful part of transportation. Regular handling pre-transport to allow pigs to get used to human contact may reduce the stressfulness of this procedure.

Further, pigs are known to be sensitive to vibration and acceleration during transport, and can become travel-sick, which add to the stress during transport.