

Managing a phase-out: Lessons from the European sow stall experience

Group sow housing is possible and farmers are the key to success, says Herman Vermeer

The Netherlands is a long way from Alberta but there is much the local livestock industry can learn from that country about managing animal care transitions. Long a leader in adopting new technologies and approaches in livestock management, the Netherlands due to its European Union (EU) connection has also faced a pressure cooker of animal welfare debate and issues in recent years that have required dramatic changes.

“The pace of change is far accelerated in Europe compared to North America,” says Herman Vermeer, a scientist specializing in pig housing, welfare and behaviour at Wageningen UR Livestock Research, Netherlands. Case in point is the EU phase-out of sow stalls required by 2013, a topic he discussed at the 2012 Livestock Care Conference, hosted by Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC).

In particular, Vermeer shared many insights on the evolution, pros and cons of alternate housing systems, along with the thought processes behind how he and scientific colleagues have pursued new designs and worked with industry to help farmers make the transition. It has been a formidable challenge, he says, and one where science has been required to not only respond to technical challenges but to find solutions in line with public sentiment toward an often emotional issue. The challenges have been met by the science but the fast pace of transition has been difficult for the industry. “With science we can solve problems. We have made adjustments but it has not been easy for the pig farmers.”

Regardless of where one stands on the sow stalls debate, a benefit of what the Netherlands has gone through is that the pressure did fuel some key advances in pig housing, including in the science and design that supports it. These advances offer options for North America and other parts of the world to consider as they too take a closer look at alternative systems. The sow stalls issue now appears to be entering the fast lane in North America, signaled by the February 2012 announcement by McDonalds U.S. to ask its U.S. pork suppliers to end the practice of sow confinement in gestation stalls.

Seven key insights

Here is a collection of seven key points Vermeer covered in his Livestock Care Conference presentation:

1. Principles of a new welfare assessment model. Public sentiment is one thing. Science is another. For the past two years one of the challenges put to Vermeer and European colleagues has been to develop an updated welfare quality protocol, to bring an objective framework to welfare assessment. “The protocol is multi-species – not just for pigs, but also for horses, cows, veal and poultry,” says Vermeer. “We have come up with a framework based on four principles – good feeding, good housing, good health and proper behaviour.”

2. Teamwork drives progress. The work of Vermeer and colleagues to help build the pathway to new systems was supported jointly on a 50/50 basis by industry and government. “It has been a sort of triangle model of the animal movement, industry and government working together, with science assisting,” says Vermeer. “We are much better if we are all coordinated and in agreement on the solutions we are pursuing.”

3. Anticipating issues. Though the pace of implementing change has been faster than industry would have liked, a major reason the Netherlands has been able to do this successfully under a pressure-driven timeframe is that it anticipated early on the direction things were moving. “As far back as in the early 90s, we all sat together to talk about what could be done with alternative systems. The government was very proactive. They asked about what group housing systems were possible and the attitude was that if group housing options could be viable then they would ban individual housing. Those discussions also led immediately to our research project to help assess and design the best options.”

4. Growth in relationships helps adjust to bumps in the road. While the government stance was demanding, it was not inflexible, says Vermeer. The players agreed the early 90s was too soon to push for changes, particularly due to other more pressing challenges the industry was facing. They also wanted time to address weaknesses of group housing systems, which at that time were associated with lower performance and high management requirements. By the mid 90s, the scientists had developed a better handle on the options, concluding that group housing could be viable under certain conditions. Industry though, would need to be ready to adjust to those conditions. “At this time, the pig industry had the opportunity to take the lead,” says Vermeer. “The government and industry agreed that if industry could make plans and a commitment to say by 2005 all the pigs would be group housing, this industry-led path would be taken and there would be no legislation.”

That timeframe was relaxed when the industry faced different challenges, most notably the outbreak of classical swine fever in 1997, and the target for implementation shifted to 2008. Eventually, in part with export pressure from the UK – where group housing was compulsory since 1999 – agendas in the Netherlands merged with the parallel evolution at the European Union level, with all EU countries required to have sow stalls phased out by 2013.

5. System design based on animal needs. The process of assessing and designing alternative systems has been extremely thorough, says Vermeer. The scientists involved ultimately settled their recommendations around innovative system designs that are based on animal needs. Specific needs included in these criteria are nutrition, rest, exploration, social contact, excretion, comfort behaviour (body care), locomotion, health, thermocomfort and safety. “Our approach is to improve systems based on the latest knowledge on each of these areas,” says Vermeer.

Examples of concepts explored within group housing systems that have been updated and are now being implemented include “cafeteria-style” housing, free access stalls, electronic sow feeding, “ad-lib” feeding and others. All those implemented are backed by specific, science-based implementation protocols and animal welfare monitoring approaches.

6. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Today the Netherlands has already accomplished sow gestation stalls phase-out, ahead of the EU deadline, reports Vermeer. “More than 75 percent of our sows are already in group housing. The 25 percent that hasn’t converted plan to use free exit stalls, which is a simple system and easy to manage, or exit the pig industry. These stalls are closed for feeding and outside feeding times they are always open.”

7. Farmers are the key to success. While the process has been a challenging one for pig farmers they have ultimately been the ones responsible for this achievement, says Vermeer. “If there is one thing we have learned that we can pass on to you in North America, it’s that group sow housing is possible and the farmer is the key to success.” Feedback today suggests pig farmers who have bought in to the new approaches are seeing management and performance benefits related to the new systems.