

Sow Stalls, Group Housing Both Work If Managed Well

COLUMBIA, MO.

Pig welfare depends not on the use of gestation stalls or group housing but on the quality of individual pig care, said a University of Missouri Extension swine specialist.

"Managed correctly, any of the housing systems can work. If we look at the body of scientific literature, it doesn't matter how sows are housed. It matters more how they're cared for," said Tim Safranski.

At the Missouri Pork Expo, Safranski reviewed individual and group housing and described the pros and cons of each. He said either option can work with proper pig care, which improves performance in any system.

Proper care means ensuring basic needs like food, water and protection from weather, Safranski said. It also means reducing hazards and competition and allowing sows to express most normal patterns of behavior.

"With all the sow-housing options, gestation stalls fit most of those. Group housing could fit most of those. None of them really fit every point perfectly," he said.

Safranski cited a 2005 paper from the American Veterinary Medical Association that concluded that "no existing housing system for pregnant sows is better than another."

Overall, stalls prevent fighting, reduce stress and injury, and make vaccinating, medical care and artificial insemination easier. Stalls also make individual care much easier, Safranski said. "We can control individual feed intake: get those skinny sows more food, give those fat sows less."

But stalls restrict movement and some natural behaviors, like socializing and foraging. Limited mobility may cause joint stiffness. Stalls also make sows entirely dependent on humans for basic needs and physical comfort.

With sows in stalls, daily observation is critical, Safranski said. An exercise pen may help sows showing signs of difficulty. "If we see a sow having trouble walking, giving her space to exercise and stretch may help the system overall be more productive," he said.

Group housing makes specialized care and feeding harder, but also allows sows more social interaction and movement.

Sow groups range in size from five or six sows to 80 or more. Group size affects management issues like sorting, daily observation and whether new sows can be added.

With small groups it is essential to sort, creating groups based on size, appetite, body condition and speed of eating. With 25 sows, for

example, five or more groups are needed. "Somebody's still going to be the boss pig, he said, "but if we can at least get them even to start with, they're going to stay a lot closer to uniformity than if we don't."

Once created, small groups should remain fixed. Changing sows will increase fighting and producer costs. If sows must be mixed, it's helpful to mix them into a new pen to reduce territorial behavior. "Get them all out, walk them down the aisle and put them somewhere else," Safranski said. "That way, nobody's invading my house; I'm moving into a house with strangers."

Pens must also have adequate space. This can be hard, as very little data exists on how much space group-housed sows need, Safranski said.

With large-group housing, the idea is that sows fight less because they can't figure out who the bullies are, Safranski said. This allows for dynamic groups that can be continually mixed. Broad sorting is still helpful to account for different feeding needs or temperaments.

Observing individual sows is still harder, which can complicate breeding, vaccinating, heat checking and control of individual feed intake.

Trickle feeding or electronic sow feeders offer possible technological solutions for the feed dilemma of group housing. Each has pros and cons.

Limiting sow stress just after mating can also improve group housing, Safranski said. "Sows are most sensitive to stress from the time of mating to about 30 days after," he said. "If we can avoid stressing sows from group housing during that period, it adds value."

After that, sows can physiologically handle a lot of stress, such as fighting, which is associated with group housing, and still maintain pregnancy.

Safranski said the European standard combines both housing types. Groups are used post-weaning to deal with stress, help sows cycle and sort those in heat. Sows ready for mating move to the boar area to be mated. They remain in a stall for 30 days then return to groups.

Regardless of housing type, the key is attention to detail, Safranski said.

"I don't care what kind of housing system, you've got to do things right," he said. "We don't just go out and harvest pigs in the wild. We manage them. Why? Because we have to feed the world, and that's what we're about." Δ