

Swine Well Being and Pork Safety

The issue of sow gestation stalls in swine production continues to be a controversial subject. The option to stalls, of course, is gestation pens (groups of multiple sows within a single pen). As with most livestock management practices, there are pros and cons to both. Before I get to those, I would like to back up and explain how the swine industry ended up with sow stalls in the first place.

In the days of the small, diversified farm, raising pigs was not the primary source of income for most farms. Pigs were kept outside or in shelters with little or no environmental control. During that time, pigs going to market were valued by the amount of fat or lard in the carcass, not by the amount of lean meat. Through the '60s and '70s, farmers realized that pigs were more comfortable and grew better if they lived in environmentally controlled buildings, which stayed between 65° and 75°F (thermo-neutral temperatures for pigs). Without the extreme weather, pigs raised indoors no longer needed the thick layer of fat to survive. Leaner pigs could be raised indoors. During the '80s, consumers became more health conscious and began to demand leaner pork in their diets. Improved genetics and nutrition, as well as sophisticated environmentally controlled buildings allowed pig farmers to supply a much leaner and healthier product for consumers. In the early '90s, pork processors started valuing pigs based on their lean content, not the lard content. It became very difficult to raise the safe, lean pork that consumers demanded on outside fields or pastures where there was no control over weather extremes.

Through the same time period, farms of all types became much more specialized. Farms with only pigs for income became commonplace, and those farms continued to improve management and pig care. Pork producers became experts at providing comfortable environmental conditions and optimal nutrition and were able to manage their herds much better with inside, temperature controlled facilities compared to outside facilities. The amount of pork meat that each sow produces each year has more than doubled in the last 30 years. Excellent management, nutrition, genetics, and environmentally controlled facilities are all necessary to achieve this level of production.

As for the breeding herd specifically, conception rates and piglet survivability vastly improved with sows that were raised inside compared to outside lots. Environmentally controlled facilities allowed boars and sows to live and thrive with constant temperatures, no rain, snow or wind, and in turn, production was consistent throughout the year. Sudden extremes in weather on outside lots could and did wipe out entire groups of baby pigs. This was no longer a problem with environmentally controlled facilities.

Inside confinement facilities were not without problems for the gestating sow herd. The aggressive and territorial nature of gestating sows resulted in considerable fighting and bite wounds when sows were group housed in pens. It was not uncommon for sows to fight to



the death to protect their own territory. Producers eventually solved this problem by housing sows in individual stalls. Fighting, aggressive biting and many other sow injuries were virtually eliminated when the gestating sows were moved to individual stalls. *Producers were able to treat and take care of individually housed sows much more effectively when sows were in stalls compared to group pens or outside lots.* That is how pork production evolved from outside lots, to inside pens, to individual stalls.

From an infectious disease perspective, there is no question that the health of the national swine herd has improved with indoor confinement production. In the past 50 years, several diseases have been eliminated from the national herd including hog cholera, pseudorabies, brucellosis, and trichinosis. Others diseases are rarely seen in confinement pigs including leptospirosis, internal parasites, and external parasites. The individual stall system allows producers to vaccinate and treat sows much more effectively than in pens where sows can easily run away from a worker with a syringe. It would have been much more difficult or impossible to control these disease issues if production was all in gestation pens or still in outside lots. Excellent vaccines and good animal husbandry in confinement systems allowed the industry to control and eliminate these diseases. In turn, pork meat in this country is substantially safer than it was 30 or 40 years ago.

In summary, the diversified farm became more specialized to raise only pork, the pigs became leaner to meet consumer demand, and most of the production was moved inside and ultimately into individual stalls so pork producers could control the environment and take care of the pigs better. The result is that fewer sows are needed on a national level to meet the needs of the consumer. Today's modern swine industry is producing pork meat that is lean, free of parasites, and safe for consumers.

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