



Pig welfare in the US

M. Terry Coffey, PhD

Promoting animal well being is one of the primary ethical responsibilities of the swine industry. Among the challenges for producers is that the public and consumers have a lack of understanding about pig farming because less than one percent of the population is involved in agriculture today. This lack of understanding is especially apparent when it comes the topic of animal welfare. Individuals bring different perspectives on what an animal needs to be in a state of well being. For example some may think that welfare is improved for pigs raised in free range or outdoor systems compared with those that are reared in confinement. However, during extreme weather conditions such as periods of intense heat or extreme cold and/or snow welfare is actually diminished in these systems. There is no one perfect way way to raise pigs and there are many systems that, if managed properly, can support a state of well being for pigs.

To ensure proper welfare in pig production today, it is important to continuously evaluate and, if needed, improve our methods of production and animal care as determined by research and objective scientific data. The American Veterinary Medical Association¹ describes animal welfare as how an animal is coping with the conditions (as indicated by scientific evidence) in which it lives: “A good state of welfare is when an animal is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviors, and is not in pain, fearful, or distressed. Further, good animal welfare requires disease prevention, veterinary care, appropriate shelter, proper management, nutrition, humane handling and humane slaughter.”

Considering this definition, it is obvious that pork producers must carefully manage all aspects of the production process to ensure that their pigs are in a state of well being. Properly trained employees that understand the principles of animal welfare and the importance of welfare to the production of safe and wholesome food are essential. Areas of management that require particular focus include proper handling, pain management, euthanasia and gestation housing.

Consumers are increasingly interested in knowing more about how there food is produced and want to be assured that food animals are produced humanely. In some countries (EU and Australia), governments have created welfare regulations that set forth detailed specific requirements for livestock producers including housing design, transport regulations, pain management, space requirements, etc. Sometimes these requirements may not based upon scientific data and as a result may actually deteriorate the welfare state and/or needlessly add

cost that must be passed along to the consumer. For example, the floor space requirement for sows in group gestation pens in Australia is about 15 sq ft. while in the EU it is about 24 sq ft. Obviously, these cannot both be correct if based upon scientific data. Numerous research studies in various countries have consistently demonstrated that when objectively measured, the well being of sows in group gestation housing is not improved as space allowance is increased above 15-16 sq ft.

In the United States, animal cruelty is a criminal offense, but there are no national government welfare standards for food-animal production. For the swine industry, producer groups including the National Pork Board and the National Pork Producers Council have worked with packers and other industry stakeholders to develop production welfare standards. The Pork Board maintains and operates the Pork Quality Assurance-Plus program (PQA-Plus) which is defined as “an educational and certification process for best production practices to ensure food safety, animal well being, environmental stewardship, worker safety, public health and community.” The program is continuously evaluated and revised every three years to meet the industry goals as well as expectations of customers and consumers. Producers become certified via an educational program and then farms are certified to receive PQA-Plus status through an on-farm assessment. Also, the Pork Board began to work with packers, customers and other industry stakeholders to develop a common foundation for on-farm third party welfare audits to facilitate consistency across the industry. This third party welfare audit is in addition to the PQA-Plus site assessment and is called The Common Swine Industry Audit. The purpose of this audit is to provide third party verification that the animal well being system of PQA-Plus is working as designed.

Today all major meat processors in the US require their suppliers to be both PQA-Plus certified and to routinely complete The Common Swine Industry Audit to ensure that pig welfare is maintained.

The most controversial welfare issue in the US swine industry is the use of gestation stalls and even though there are no scientific data that indicate that sow well being is actually improved in gestation pen housing compared with gestation stalls, some states have outlawed the use of gestation stalls. The top 10 swine producing states in the US produced more than 90% of the country’s pork, and none of those states have outlawed the use of stalls—these individual state laws have not had an impact on a significant amount of production capacity. In 2019,

the state of California adopted a law that, effective January 2022, will prohibit the sale of certain pork products in the state that were not produced according to California production standards regardless of whether the pigs were raised in California. California is a state with a large population and represents about 13% of the US market for pork but only has 1,500 commercial breeding sows in production. To fill the state's demand for pork requires the off spring of about 675,000 sows. And according to the National Pork Producers Council, only about one percent of the nation's pork supply would meet the requirements. Some of the law's most onerous requirements are related to sow housing: for example, the law requires sows to have at least 24 sq ft of space in gestation pens. This is being challenged in the courts based on the fact that the standards are arbitrary and are not based upon scientific data. Further, since the state produces only a fraction of the pork it consumes, the law would essentially regulate farms beyond its borders. Agricultural groups argue that this is in violation of the commerce clause of the US Constitution.

As consumers become more interested in how their food is produced, animal welfare standards and programs have evolved across the pork supply chain. Most major food retailers and restaurant chains in the US have established minimum welfare standards

for pig production, transport and harvest. Many of these are consistent with the requirements of the PQA-Plus and The Common Swine Industry Audit, but there are examples where companies establish welfare requirements that go beyond these standards. Most often this is for premium pork products and/or specialty items. These types of products usually demand a higher price for swine producers who are willing and able to adapt their operations to meet the requirements.

Although research results show that sows can maintain a proper state of welfare in gestation stalls or group housing systems, some producers in North America, in response to customer desires, have converted or announced plans to phase out gestation stalls. This process has been underway for about 10 years, and today approximately one-third of the sows in the US reside in group-housed systems. However, even after conversion to pen gestation, less than one percent of the sows in the US are housed in systems that would meet the requirements of the California law that was previously discussed.

Producers must remain committed to continuous learning and continuous

improvement of pig well being in our production systems. Undoubtedly, consumer expectations will continue to evolve as well. Pork producers, veterinarians and animal scientists must support and encourage sound science and be willing to use objective evidence as the basis for changes in production practices.

References:

1. www.avma.org/resources/animal-health-welfare/