Meeting of the sub-group on the welfare of pigs

Third meeting, 27 June 2022
(Videoconference)

– MINUTES –

Attendance

Independent expert	Anna Valros Anne-Claire Berensten
Civil society organisations	CIWF
Business and professional organisations	COGECA FVE UECBV
Member States	Denmark Germany Italy Sweden
European Commission	DG SANTE G5, F2
Guest	European Reference Centre for the Welfare of pigs External contractor for IA study on kept animals

Discussions on *Tail-docking*

1. Context by the Commission

Commission presented the context of the discussion on tail docking, referring in particular, to the requirements of the current legislation and the situation of tail docking in the EU. Commission also presented briefly its actions to end the routine tail docking of pigs, the overall problems caused by tail docking and certain drawbacks in the national action plans of Member States for the prevention of routine tail docking. Lastly, Commission explained the relevant parts of the Inception Impact Assessment (problems to be addressed and options envisaged).

2. Presentation by Anna Varlos

The independent expert presented an overview of tail biting and tail docking in pigs. In summary, tail docking is unacceptable as a practice because it does not resolve tail biting and does not remedy the causes thereof, it masks bad welfare and it results in sacrificing the welfare of many pigs to prevent tail biting of a few. Therefore, there is a practical and also an ethical dimension in practicing tail docking. Moreover, tail biting is a multifactorial problem and has no easy solution applicable to all holdings. According to farmers, the most important risk factors for tail biting involve climate, stocking density, ill health, piglet quality and feed & water. Tail biting is a behaviour anticipated under intensive farming conditions, therefore the solution lies in keeping it in a manageable level. This solution includes reducing chronic risk factors and minimising acute risk factors. Ready to use emergency protocols should be available in acute situations in each holding. Sweden and Finland have managed to have a pig production

without systematic tail docking by applying suitable management measures. The most feasible scoring point of intact tails is at the slaughterhouses provided there is a common scoring system and definition of an intact tail.

Sum up: it is possible to raise pigs with intact tails by applying changes and achieve a manageable tail biting level. Under these conditions, pigs grow well, have higher welfare status and lower need for medication.

3. Presentation by FVE

FVE presented practical experience from the field, gathered through working with holdings raising intact pigs. The most important parameters to evaluate for the prevention of tail biting are: feed quality and composition; feed availability (a good practice is one feeder per 4 to 5 pigs, ad libitum); health status (in particular PRRS); enrichment materials (should be efficient/availability of alternative materials for emergency use); environmental conditions (temperature, gases, ventilation); genetics (care adjusted to individual breed); motivation of farmers (role of vet to organise visits to other farms); training of farmers (trials in indicator pens). It was stressed that in countries with hot climate in certain periods, producers may not be able to maintain indoor temperature in acceptable levels, even when using cooling systems.
Sum up: there is a significant need for training and motivation of farmers, as the goal is to change their mind-set. Visit to other farms is crucial as farmers experience is easier to communicate to other farmers. There should be measures tailored to farms and management of chronic and acute risk factors. If optimal enrichment (straw) is not possible to provide, there are functional and safe alternatives like hay, silage, paper, wood, natural ropes etc.

4. Experience of Italy

Italy presented orally the situation in the country. Italy has a particular pig production, as fattening pigs are slaughtered when they reach a weight of 180kg. 15-20% of farms comply with legislation on tail docking in the sense that they don't recur to tail docking at all, while another 40%, are those that are still conducting trials having introduced groups of pigs with intact tails.
Italy's efforts to achieve this level of compliance can be broken down as follows:

- 60% attributed to **official controls** and awareness of official vets (main factor that played a role)
- 20% attributed to t**raining** of veterinary professionals and farmers
- 10% attributed to i**nitiatives** to promote animal welfare e.g. labelling scheme
- 10% attributed to measures through cross compliance

Classyfarm system has been used to motivate both farmers and veterinarians.

5. Presentation by Anne-Claire Berensten

The independent expert presented her suggestions to resolve the problem of tail docking. The current EU situation on tail docking faces the following problems:

- The corresponding legal provision prohibits the procedure of tail docking but not the trade and rearing of tail docked pigs.
- Fattening holdings receive already tail docked pigs and do not take any responsibility on the situation. They claim being capable of rearing intact pigs, but not finding such animals in the market. On the other hand, breeding farms respond to the demand of fattening farms for tail docked pigs (no real demand for intact animals).
- Competent authorities are not able to verify the risk assessments, improvement measures and statements made by the farmers.
- Official veterinarians are not specialised in welfare issues, as most of them are generalists.

- It is difficult, from a legal point to view, to enforce improvement measures that go beyond legal requirements.

The two options envisaged in the Inception Impact Assessment do not suffice to solve the problem of tail docking, as they are subject to several limitations presented above. The transfer of Commission Recommendation (EU) 2016/336, would not solve the problem either, for the same reasons.

The expert presented a third option based on a potential legal requirement similar to article (3) of Council Directive 2007/43/EC. According to this rational, the legal provision would:

- Establish a minimum requirement for space allowance
- Provide the possibility to derogate from the above minimum requirement, under two conditions:
  - All pigs are undocked
  - The percentage (X%)of tail lesions found at slaughter is less than a predefined figure.

6. Additional views

One member of the subgroup expressed the opinion that additional, precise legal restrictions should be established on tail docking, such as documentation for the whole chain of production, from birth to slaughter of animals. This requirement should be coupled with higher space allowances, on farm risk assessments followed by action plans, training of farmers and gradual transition.

Another member pointed out the importance of higher space allowances in phasing out tail docking, while a member is of the opinion that it is not the actual space but rather the design of the housing.

A member mentioned that Portugal has achieved a 30% of holdings with intact pigs and supported that there is a need for more research under local conditions and a suitable transitional period.

Most members of the Subgroup considered that the proposed third option under point (5) is interesting and should be explored. Members highlighted the following advantages and disadvantages of this option:

Advantages:

- It provides economic incentives for the farmers
- It creates a demand for intact pigs
- It can be quicker applied than a total ban of tail docking
- The stocking density can be easily verifiable by the competent authorities

Disadvantages:

- It does not consist a total ban of tail docking, which is the end goal as regards animal welfare
- The assessment of tail lesions at slaughterhouses should be made in a harmonized way across Member States, using a standard scoring system.
- A threshold percentage (X %) of tail lesions should be established, which depends on the definition of the notion of ‘tail lesion’.

7. Transition

Some members underlined that the best motivation for farmers would be a total ban of tail docking, combined with a transitional period. However, the third option described under point (5), could be used as a transitional measure until a permanent ban of tail docking is imposed.

Members agreed that a suitable transitional period should be set, combined with robust tools for the farmers, including the ones facing the problem of high environmental temperatures (research, training). The length of this period should take into account the time needed for training of farmers and for making investments.

Regarding the concrete duration of the transitional period, some members did not provide an opinion. One member indicated that a total ban might take ten years while the application of the third option could be easily achieved within 1-2 years. Another member highlighted that the prohibition of tail docking is in force since many years and therefore, a total ban should not take so long.

The Commission asked the members to indicate which elements should be taken into account to enable the calculation of the transitional period.

8. Summary of meeting and next steps

The next meeting is scheduled for **04.7.2022** and will be dedicated on **pig castration**.
Members are invited to provide to the Commission any data they referred to during the meeting.