# Meeting of the sub-group on the welfare of pigs

## Second meeting, 19 May 2022
## (Videoconference)

## – MINUTES –

### Attendance

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

### Discussions on *Free housing of sows and gilts*

#### 1. Context by the Commission

The Commission presented the context of the discussion on free housing of sows and gilts, referring in particular, to the requirements of the current legislation and the commitment to prohibit and eventually ban the cages in the future, following the European Citizen Initiative "End the cage age". Commission also explained the relevant parts of the Inception Impact Assessment (problems to be addressed and issues to be taken into account).

#### 2. Presentation by Sweden

Sweden and CIWF presented the loose housing system in Sweden.
They referred to the evolution of the national legislation and relevant change of requirements, from 1998 to date.

Farmers were not financially supported to make the transition, but the higher cost of production was transferred to the price of meat.

Important parameters of the free housing system are space allowances, drained area, slurry systems and access to nesting material before giving birth. Genetic selection plays an important role in free farrowing.
Nowadays, the Swedish legislation allows the confinement of sows in farrowing units only in case of need (aggressive sow or other reason) for a duration of a few days. Farmers make a choice to construct their farrowing units with or without an option for confinement.

Sum up: it is possible to have loose housing of sows, but it is important to have more space and good management. The adaptation to such a production follows a learning curve.

### 3. Presentation by UECBV

UECBV distinguishes between free farrowing and free lactation. The main problem of free farrowing has to do with the mortality of piglets due to crushing by the sow. Based on their research, temporary confinement does not make a difference on sows' stress and behaviour.
UECBV supports regular temporary confinement as the best solution. This means keeping the sows loose before farrowing but confine them during and up to four days after farrowing. Pen size and layout, flooring and handling of manure are very important. In general, parameters interact with each other so it is difficult to make decisions on the construction of the pens. In addition, certain decisions are irreversible.
UECBV stated that free farrowing increases emissions of holdings into the environment.
Sum up: the situation among countries is variable. Temporary confinement would be more attractive for producers. Exchange of experience and research on knowledge gaps is needed.

### 4. Understanding the different free-housing solutions

The group agreed that there are 3 possible options in terms of confinement of sows and gilts in farrowing units:

a. Zero confinement (ZC)
b. Temporary confinement when needed (TCn)
c. Regular temporary confinement (TCr)

The members also agreed that opening up existing farrowing crates does not consist an option for free farrowing. Pens need to be designed for free farrowing either temporary confinement is practised or not.

Systems (b) and (c) are not very different in terms of construction but the approach is totally different as regards farm management.

A member pointed out there is a great difference between the farrowing crates commonly used nowadays and the temporary confinement practiced in (b) and (c) systems above. In the latter case, sows have more space and ability to move.

Some members are in favour of the ZC or TCn and believe there are many advantages in this approach. Other members support temporary confinement, for 2-4 days, or even some hours after farrowing. They consider that TCr gives more options to work on animal welfare.

### 5. Which are the impacts of each free-housing solution?

***On animal welfare:***

One could assume that the ZC or TCn are the best solutions in terms of animal welfare. However, piglets' mortality should be taken into account to estimate the overall animal welfare. Some experts are of the opinion that the best solution would be the TCn. One member argued that there is a research gap for animal welfare in TCn systems.

Another member believes that ZC and TCn would be the best solution for an ideal world only and that legislation should give the opportunity to farmers to choose themselves on the degree of confinement of animals.

***On Piglets:***

**Crushing of piglets by the sow** consists a problem when phasing out the farrowing crates. Systems providing for temporary confinement could help mitigate the risk of crushing.

The piglets' crushing may be owned to the 'killer' sows or to random incidents (e.g. a sow just sitting down). However, only the presence of 'killer' sows influences the overall piglet mortality.

Some members supported that farmers get to know their animals and can foresee which of them have a potential to become aggressive or careless with the piglets. In most cases, it is not necessary to confine the sows but only if they get older and unstable or in the transition period between crates and free farrowing.

Other members are of the opinion that it is difficult for farmers to know the behaviour of all their animals, especially in large farms. As a result, farmers cannot predict which animals will become aggressive or repeat a killing behaviour, crushing their piglets. There are also random parameters that cannot be predicted (e.g. farrowing during the night where no staff is present to take care of piglets).

A member believes that the key issue is to learn how to assess the risks (sows in poor condition, old sows, sows with aberrant behaviour etc.) and not to know the individual behaviour of each sow.

A couple of members stated that in their countries, even large farms practicing TCn do not report significant total mortality of piglets, concluding that the size of the farm does not play a role in piglets' mortality.

The **litter size** is a crucial parameter that influences piglets' mortality. The larger the litter size the larger the risk of high piglets' mortality is in a free farrowing system.

On the other hand, **the increase of weaning weight** that is associated with systems of ZC leads to less piglets' mortality at weaning.

***On Animal health:***

Some members underlined that ZC is associated with better sow health and better growth rate for piglets, which appears to reduce the risk of tail biting at a later stage. It also reduces the need to use antimicrobials, thus contributing to combatting AMR. A member is of the opinion that there is scientific evidence that better growth rates can also be attained in TCr.

***On citizens' demand***

In some countries, the idea of confinement of animals is not acceptable.

However, it is difficult to foresee the reaction of consumers. Some consumers do not even realise that the animals are confined. It is also questionable whether the consumers are prepared to pay higher prices for the products. Current experience shows that pig meat from countries practicing ZC is more expensive than others on the market.

The reaction of citizens also depends on the way the question is phrased and the explanations provided as a background.

***On farmers:***

**Costs** can be divided in investment costs and additional management costs (running costs).

Some members stated that high **investments** are needed and farmers are not especially keen on making investments. At the moment, farmers experience uncertainty due to not having a clear idea of future production requirements.

Most members believe that there is not much difference in construction cost between ZC and TC systems: in the first case the cost corresponds to the greater space needed and in the second, to the construction of the confinement area. However, this is disputable as ZC and TCn offer comparable space allowances.

Moreover, there is a difference of construction cost corresponding to the different floors and slurry systems: a slurry system capable of removing nesting and enrichment material, is more sophisticated and

therefore, expensive. This type of slurry system is frequently associated with ZC systems but this is not always the case. Therefore, the real question is whether there is a difference between the slurry systems of ZC and TC systems. The provision of nesting and enrichment material is highly recommended in all cases (ZC and TC systems).

Some members estimate that farmers will need to double the existing space of their farm. Others believe that there will be a need for construction of new buildings, counting to 1/3 more space compared to the existing. An estimated cost of 4000-5000 euros per farrowing pen was also expressed. Another member sent (post meeting) an estimation of approximately 6000 euros per farrowing pen. One member believes that space allowance does not equal animal welfare level, given that other parameters, such as the pen design, also play a role.

In terms of **running costs,** most members agreed that labour costs are almost equivalent for the three systems: ZC or TCn systems need more observation of animals by the staff while in TCr systems, staff has to open and close the confinement area of the pens. The total amount of labour per day is comparable.

Regarding the number of staff needed, members do not find any significant difference between the three systems.

The need for **authorizations** of farmers to construct new premises should also be taken into account.

***On the environment:***

The design of the slurry system may have an environmental impact. There are 3 different types of emissions: green house, odour and $NH_3$. One member expressed the view that there is a major impact of all three systems (ZC, TCn, TCr) on the environment, compared to the existing system.

***Other impacts:***

Some members believe that systems with TC show a benefit as regards the welfare of stock people, as there are issues of **human safety** when handling sows in the farrowing pens. TC also facilitates other handling, like for the vaccination of piglets.

As regards possible impacts to authorities, **inspectors** should have the means to verify the length of any confinement period of the sows in TC systems. Members consider that this could be achieved by examining the farrowing records and assessing the cleanliness of the pens. Moreover, sows at different stages of lactation should be present in the herd. Finally, it was pointed out that farmers have no interest to keep the sows in confinement more than a few days, otherwise they would lose positive effects of loose housing of sows such as the higher weight gain in piglets due to easier access to the udder

In relation to **trade**, a member finds there will be significant impact and the competitiveness of the EU market will be affected, as non-EU countries produce cheap meat. The provisions that will apply to imported products will also play a role.

Another member stated that there will be no major change in imports as the EU does not import pig meat. However, the EU needs to have 6000000 tonnes of export of pig meat to balance the market, therefore, the export sector will be affected.

## 6. Can we mitigate negative impacts?

Members agreed that **'killer' sows** should be recognised as early as possible and managed appropriately. Tools can be developed to help farmers recognize sows that are likely to kill piglets (e.g. use of indicators like water consumption per sow/pen, rectal temperature and restlessness).

There should be a **temperature difference** between sow's and piglets' areas. In southern countries this parameter is very challenging and cannot be easily achieved even when using coolers.

As regards the **pen construction**, it is important to look not only at the size of the pen but also at the area usable by the sow. In Finland, the resting area of the sow is approximately 5 $m^2$ and the total pen area 7$m^2$. The floor should not be slippery.

**Sows health** should be in good condition, meaning good management of dry sows and maintenance of good activity to exercise their muscles.

**Genetic selection** is considered very important, as large litter size may result in high risk of piglets' being crushed by the sow. Also maternal behaviour is very important for loose housing systems.

Some members do not recommend as a general practice to wean the piglets in the farrowing pen while moving the sow away (hygiene needed for weaning, farrowing unit is the most expensive on a farm).

The **transition** to free housing should be made gradually and smoothly, with adequate support to farmers. In some countries, farmers can receive subsidies either for ZC or TC.

**Training** is crucial as most farmers are not familiar with free farrowing systems. Therefore, there should be enough time to teach them and increase knowledge.

A member estimated that farmers need at least 6 months to adopt to free farrowing systems and 1-2 years before they can settle down to a routine production.

## 7. Summary of meeting and next steps

The next meeting is scheduled for **27.6.2022** and will be dedicated on **tail docking**.
Members are invited to provide to the Commission any data they referred to during the meeting (e.g. costs per pen for the new systems, studies on impacts and consumers, welfare subsidies, relevant scientific studies).
The Commission will launch doodles to enable a convenient scheduling of the meetings in July and the rest of 2022.