

Meeting of the sub-group on the welfare of pigs

Eighth meeting, 13 December 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
Guest	European Reference Centre for the Welfare of pigs External contractor for IA study on kept animals

Discussions on *space allowances and floors for sows and gilts, piglets, boars and in particular cases*

1. Context by the Commission

The Commission explained the purpose of the meeting. The discussion followed the presentation of an independent expert and was divided in topics as shown below.

2. Space allowance for sows and piglets in the farrowing pen

Presentation by the expert

The expert made the following points:

An overview the international situation, i.e. of the requirements in countries that have already legislated loose housing of sows in farrowing pens, with or without temporary confinement. In summary, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland use pens of around 6m² (even larger for new-built establishments) with no confinement and solid floors. Austria and Germany apply temporary confinement in pens of 5,5m² and 6,5m², respectively.

The importance of the space for the sow. The space given to the sow is very important, as she has to be able to make certain movements to gather the piglets in one place so she can lie down without crushing them ('sows group their piglets together before lying down, by extensively rooting, scratching and turning around on the lying surface. This causes the piglets to gather together, whereupon the sow carefully lies down beside them'- Weber et al. 2007). This requirement is addressed by providing enough space (ability to turn around), non-slippery floors (plastic floors frequently used are not suitable) and adequate pen structure. Addressing the needs of the sow is more important than having elements for the piglets to hide.

The legislation of Germany foresees a size of 6,5m² for the farrowing pen, which was based on the needs of the sow to perform postural movements and not on piglet mortality. In 2018, the Institute FLI recommended a width around 200cm and (based on old scientific calculations) a length of 227-252cm, resulting in about 5m², to which the space for piglets was added.

A comparison of productivity between zero and continuous confinement. When comparing the number of piglets born alive and the number of weaned piglets between Norway, that applies zero confinement and Germany, that applies continuous confinement until weaning, one can conclude that Germany has higher piglet mortality, even though the lactation period is 24 days against 33 days in Norway. In the end, Germany has more weaned piglets per sow per year, as a) the number of piglets born is slightly higher and b) there are more cycles per year due to the shorter lactation period. However, the production data shows Norway is very competitive, which points to the fact that the crate is not needed to be productive.

The unsuitability of the crate to accommodate the sow needs and consequently, the legislation. Crates cannot be designed to fulfil the existing legislative provisions. A review by Pedersen et al, 2013, studied the pen structure to give enough space to the sow and concluded a minimum width of 80-90cm and length of 220cm. However, these dimensions still do not grant enough space to the animal to turn around. Therefore, the requirements stimulated in articles 3 and 4 of Council Directive 98/58/EC and point 3 of Chapter I, Annex I of Directive 2008/120/EC should mean that no crates are used.

The piglets' nest. All piglets should be able to lie on solid floor¹ up to weaning according to existing legislation. So solid floor should be of enough size to accommodate the size piglets have one day before being a weaner. However, the heating is needed only during the first two weeks of life and therefore, the piglets nest could have a bigger solid floor of which a smaller area is heated. Suitable equations to calculate the solid and the heated areas may be found in scientific literature (EFSA opinion 2022 and Wheeler et al 2008).

Conclusion: in the opinion of the expert, the future EU legislation should follow the EFSA recommendation for zero confinement in a pen size of 7,8m², taking also into account EFSA's recommendation to not use temporary confinement as an intermediate step to loose farrowing. The minimum pen size should not go below 6,5m², and this only if temporary confinement is chosen, which however is not needed and cannot provide the necessary turning cycle of at least 2-2,2m (when the crate is opened in temporary confinement systems, the shape of the pen becomes a triangle and the available space does not provide the 2m turning cycle). Solid area for sow should be 1,3m² and for piglets 1,5m² with a heated area of 0,9m² (calculations based on a litter size of 13). In the opinion of the expert, there is no need for crates nor temporary confinement in the farrowing pen.

Discussion:

Some members agreed with the points made during the presentation while others had different views, challenging some of the presented data, e.g. a member replied that the scientific paper by Baxter et al 2011, concludes that the sow needs 153 cm (and not 200cm) to be able to turn around. Another member stated that the cost of production in Switzerland (free farrowing) is continuously growing.

On the total size of the farrowing pen, a member recalled that EFSA concluded on a range of 4,5-9,8m² with additional space for piglets, and therefore the size can be settled lower than recommended in the EFSA opinion. However, other members underlined that the degree of uncertainty and variation leaves room to argue on both edges of this range, with the same level of confidence (90%). Another member pointed out that the increase of space leads to higher environmental emissions. Also, the increased cost of higher space should

¹ 'or covered with a mat, or be littered with straw or any other suitable material', Council Directive 2008/120/EC, Annex I, Chapter II, C(1).

be balanced against the welfare benefit for the sow, given the EFSA opinion concludes that for every additional square meter, the sow's locomotory behaviour increases in a limited manner.

Several members supported temporary confinement for reasons of piglet survival. A member referred to the recent scientific review by Edwards et al 2022, which showed a higher piglet mortality associated with free farrowing compared to temporary confinement, regardless of the scientific study reviewed. Another member shared its experience that temporary confinement for 2-3 days for certain sows (not all) can be successful in terms of piglet survival and welfare of sows. Other members acknowledged that both zero and temporary confinement can work, but if the ultimate goal is free farrowing, then the farmers should not be asked to make the transition in two steps, as they will have to change their farms twice. A member stressed that in case future legislation allows temporary confinement, free farrowing with zero confinement will never be possible, as the mortality will be very high due to unsuitability of the pen. Therefore, if the end goal is free farrowing, the pen should be designed for that.

Members underlined the importance of the design of the pen, which should be suitable for loose farrowing of lactating sows, emphasising that the mere opening of existing crates does not give enough space for loose farrowing. On the question how the legislation should foresee the pen design, some members suggested that legislation should not prescribe the pen, as the individual situation of each farm will dictate the exact pen design. A member considers space allowance should not be set at all, even if it is easily measured and controlled. Another member stated that different options should be left open for farmers to choose.

Other members, while acknowledging that the pen design can be variable but functional in different farms (e.g. the Norwegian pen type differs from Swedish and Finnish types but they all work in different farms), believe that certain elements need to be regulated as minimum requirements allowing for the desired outcome. The amount of space was considered the most critical element to decide upon, as after building a certain space one can always change the design but not the walls. Also, it would be unfair to ask farmers to transit to free farrowing without giving them a minimum pen size, because they would not be able to reach the target due to inadequate space and they would run a risk to stop their activity. Farmers need to know the minimum pen size as soon as possible, so they can already start building suitable premises.

Regarding the minimum requirements of the pen, Finland held a big project resulting in 14 recommendations² on free farrowing and concluded that certain requirements are indispensable: a total pen size of 7m² (minimum 5m² for the sow), possibility to turn around, enough solid floor and enough space for the piglets. According to the Finnish findings, a pen of 6m² will probably never allow free farrowing without increasing piglet mortality. Similarly, Sweden regulates the total size of the pen at 6m² (but is of the view that 7-8m² is better) as well as a certain amount of solid area for laying and a minimum length of the side of the pen, so as the pen cannot be thin and long and the animal can turn around. However, a member is of the opinion that a pen size of 7,8m² will lead many farmers to stop their production.

Instead of prescribing the pen design, some members suggested legislation should look at outcome indicators, e.g. piglet mortality, to guarantee that the pen works well from an animal welfare point of view. However, other members find it difficult to conceptualize such an approach. Outcome measures cannot be used to assess the suitability of a pen design, as it is not possible to test every pen in every kind of environment, given that pens might work differently in different farms. Once built, a pen cannot be changed anymore (which would have been feasible in other cases, e.g. when deciding for space allowance for fattening pigs – if a pen in the fattening unit does not work, one can take out some pigs).

Some members underlined the need to give guidance to the farmers in parallel with legislation and a suitable transitional period for adaptation. Since the legislation can only foresee few pen features (e.g. pen size and

²<https://www.helsinki.fi/fi/tutkimusryhmat/elainten-hyvinvoinnin-tutkimuskeskus/oppaat/tulevaisuuden-vapaaporsitus-suomessa/suosituksset-menestyksekkään-vapaaporsituksen-toteuttamiseksi>

length of the shortest side), additional guidance can prove useful for the farmers who may otherwise find extreme difficulties in transitioning and may even close down their business.

A similar situation occurred when the legislation changed from individual housing to group housing of sows for most of the gestation period. This was a land mark experience but after some years farmers managed to settle the situation. In Italy, the number of sows temporarily decreased but rose again after some time. In the Netherlands, many farmers just opened the back part of the sow stalls and left the sows in the communal area between two back-to-back rows of stalls, but that approach did not work. However, knowledge and experience was accumulated over time and finally the system was established.

One way to provide assistance to farmers could come through guidelines or a Commission Recommendation, similarly to (EU) 2016/336 on the application of Council Directive 2008/120/EC and the Staff Working Document on prevention of routine tail docking and provision of enrichment material. Another approach would be to ask farmers to make trials during the transitional period e.g. to first try with half of the farrowing pens.

Assistance could also come from private initiatives presenting different options on how to build a farrowing pen. Currently in Denmark, farmers are assisted to choose among different pen designs and brands before they decide which pen they prefer and start the building. This is done through a 30 stepped questionnaire which helps farmers become aware of the importance of pen features. Danish farmers apply for subsidies to build free farrowing pens and they need to complete the building within two years.

Regarding the flooring, a member supported the solid part should be without perforation. This also presents advantages from a construction point of view, as drainage openings require the existence of a manure pit under the floor.

Lastly, a member underlined that the loose farrowing of sows requires serious thinking about genetics. In particular, the breeding companies need to have their sows loose in free farrowing pens otherwise the system will never work for the end users.

3. Space allowance for dry and pregnant sows in group housing (weaning to farrowing)

Presentation by the expert

The expert made the following points:

An overview of the international situation, i.e. of the requirements in countries that have stricter rules on group housing of sows after weaning. In summary, Germany, Sweden, Norway and UK allow confinement only at the moment of insemination or feeding. Austria, Netherlands and Switzerland allow 10 days confinement around insemination while Denmark 3 days confinement around insemination, if necessary.

On the required space, sows need space for fighting and for oestrus behaviour. Germany, requires 5m² per sow from weaning to insemination (approximately one week) and then sows go to their home pen, in the pregnant sows unit. BTSF material indicates that sows need 6-7 m² to establish social hierarchy & express oestrus behaviour after which they need around 2-3m². Ideally, sows should be in the larger area until four weeks after insemination, as during this period some sows return to oestrus so one can expect more unrest than in a normal pregnant sows' area. However, this could be expensive. Also, one week stay in the larger area is acceptable from an animal welfare point of view.

As regards the space between the iron bars of the stalls, it must only account as available space if a) sows can rest in normal body posture (width 70cm) b) sows can stand up and lie down normally (difficult in current situation) c) the total space between the bars is at least 1,3m² per sow (which represents the lying area the sow needs) and d) the sows have free access to the stall, which is very difficult to verify for the competent authority. In Germany, several local authorities, have expressed their preference for banning feeding stalls as some farmers may close them for feeding and delay to reopen them.

Other required pen features include the minimum length of one side of the pen, which should be at least 2,8m or 3m for new buildings. The pen is often the area enclosed between two rows of sow stalls and therefore, the requirement of dimensions should apply to the minimum width of this communal area in which sows encounter other sows. Sows frequently go into sow stalls and do not come out as the communal area is not at all interesting for them. Also, sows of a lower rank are afraid to go out and if they wish to do so, they have to go backwards to exit where other sows may stand.

In addition, the pen must provide possibilities to escape and hide, other than free-access feeding stalls, which must not be considered as such.

In summary, the expert's opinion is that space allowance should be 5-7m² per sow between weaning and the last day of insemination of the whole group of sows. Minimum width in communal areas must be at least 280cm or better 300cm and possibilities to escape and hide should be present (not including the free access stalls). If free access stalls are allowed, most logically in the insemination unit, legislation should foresee minimum dimensions for them, which is practically difficult to establish.

Discussion:

On the housing around insemination, some members pointed out that different countries apply different regimes. So apart from providing higher space allowance for this period (5-7m²per sow), some countries allow temporary crating or housing in an individual pen of sows that are expected to hurt themselves or others due to mounting behaviour. Another reason for confining sows around insemination is that high hierarchy sows come in heat first and mount the low ranking sows which do not show heat and therefore are not mated. When young sows are mounted by dominant and often older, heavier sows, the risk of leg injuries for the young sows increases. Temporary confinement is the practice in Denmark, where sows are confined for three days, only during oestrus.

Other members think that temporary confinement around insemination is not necessary, as the space needed for oestrus behaviour is exactly the same as the one needed for ranking behaviour. Since the provision of higher space is anyway needed to establish the hierarchy, there is no reason to foresee temporary confinement for several days around oestrus.

However management measures (not for legislation) could be foreseen for the grouping of sows in order to protect weak animals from injuries due to mounting behaviour. In this regard, younger animals should be kept separately from older sows. The same principal should apply for sows that lost much weight during lactation.

Regarding the space allowance between weaning and insemination, a member emphasised the importance of limiting aggression but also promoting submissive behaviour. In this sense, there should be enough space so that animals do not get cornered by dominants. There should also be a distance long enough so that low ranking animals can flee. Otherwise there will be a risk of bad welfare conditions and lower productivity.

Another member considered it difficult to add an additional production area for mixing animals between weaning and insemination, in particular if this would need increased space and environmental approval for the expansion of the farm.

The impact of the higher space allowance on the number of animals was not considered significant, as the extra space is needed for only one week during which a smaller group of animals must have a bigger space. In general, this was not considered a big change as if the bigger space was needed for the whole gestation period. The production rhythm also plays a role. Farms with a 3 week rhythm (farrowings every 3 weeks) would be impacted more than those with a weekly rhythm (farrowings every week).

With regard to the pen side, some members consider that 2,8m is not enough and the current exception of 2,4m for small groups of animals does not make sense, as the sows should be able to avoid each other regardless of the group size. The suggested length of the side was 3m and a member proposed even 3,5m, so that sows can move freely and around each other. A member also pointed out that the legislation should not

regulate the pen side but the distance between different structures within the pen of grouped sows. Above structures should exclude short walls (e.g. 35cm) used for hiding or lying against.

On the free access stalls, there are different types used in different countries.

In Germany, there are a) feeding and resting stalls where the space in the stall is big enough for the animal to lie down laterally and rest. This is the usual situation, comprising of two rows of stalls and slatted floor in between in the communal area. Although the stalls are free access, sows lie inside them and are reluctant to go out b) feeding and insemination stalls, which are smaller, providing space only for feeding and insemination but not for lying down. There is a dedicated solid or littered lying area in the pen where animals rest together, as the small stalls are not an option for resting. This type of pen takes more space (due to additional lying and dunging area) and therefore is more expensive and less used than the previous one.

In Denmark, during the heating and insemination period sows are confined in stalls and after insemination they are moved to the gestation unit. Some farmers close the access to stalls for some hours in the pre-insemination phase, so sows mix and establish their hierarchy. In Denmark there are a) feeding and insemination stalls which are the largest as the work conditions require more space and animals spend some days confined therein (they are not free access). Sows are temporarily confined therein for up to three days during oestrus b) feeding and resting stalls with an intermediate size, used in gestation pens. They are free access, but can be locked during feeding time, if necessary to protect the sows. Danish farms have developed good practices for oestrus detection, even when sows are temporarily confined during that period, resulting in farrowing rates of 95-97%.

Several members agreed that the use of stalls is associated with welfare problems, e.g. sows hiding in the feeding stalls and deprived from locomotion and access to water, as the water nipples are usually located in the communal area. In general, feeding stalls are good only for feeding and therefore the pen area should provide enough space and quality so sows spend their time outside the feeding stalls.

A member suggested a good outcome indicator to evaluate whether the free access feeding stalls can work: the majority of sows (more than 50%) should lie elsewhere and not inside the stalls.

As regards the flooring in pens used between weaning and insemination, several members agreed that the straw would be probably the best solution to safeguard non-slippery ground and claw health during this period of mixing, increased aggression and mounting behaviour. Some farms with slatted floors use significantly smaller slats compared to the ones normally used for sows (e.g. slats for fatteners) so that the claws do not get caught inside.

Members also indicated several solutions that could apply for changing existing buildings.

- One can take out the stalls entirely and create a big single area.
- Where two rows of stalls exist, one can take out the last part of the stalls and create a T-pen system where at the end of the aisle there is a communal lying area (applied in Denmark).
- When there is no suitable indoor area, one can create an outdoor covered area suitable for keeping the animals during the week between weaning and insemination (applied in Germany). The aisle between two traditional insemination stalls could lead to an outdoor area with deep straw where sows can have their fighting. A member stressed that this solution is not suitable for some areas during the summer season, as the temperature is very high and the roof is not enough to protect the animals from heat. Outdoor areas are also associated with higher emissions compared to indoor areas and would complicate farm permissions. ASF is another problem linked to outdoor access.

For existing systems the legislation has to set a transitional period.

4. Boars

The expert considers that boars already have enough space and are better accommodated compared to sows. The improvement would consist in giving them solid floor, equivalent to a k value of 0,033 as for other categories of pigs. There were no interventions by other members on this topic.

5. Hospital pens

Presentation by the expert

The expert suggested that open norms contained in point 3 of Annex of the Council Directive 98/58/EC should be clarified in the future legislation. In particular, the expressions 'suitable accommodation' and 'where appropriate, dry comfortable bedding' should be defined in EU legislation and the 'where necessary' in national guidelines of Member States. The pen provisions should be set clearly as well as the obligation to bring sick animals into the hospital pens.

In terms of pen design, there must always be soft flooring either by a soft rubber mat or sufficient amounts of bedding to prevent direct contact between the animal and the floor, given that sick pigs are often lame and lie longer, presenting a high risk of bursitis.

The lying area should correspond to a k value of 0,033 and the minimum width should equal at least the length of the pig. The pen should contain a heat source and cooling facility.

The space allowance per sick pig should be at least double from the current space allowance (currently 0,65m² for a pig of 110kg), given that the space for lying in half recumbence is already 0,7m² and more space is needed for the pig to move around. In other words, the stocking density of sick pigs should be reduced compared to the normal.

In terms of number, hospital pens must be available either for 3% of the pig present in the farm or at least one hospital place always ready for use. Farms raising intact pigs and especially farms in transition towards no tail docking need more hospital pens to prevent tail biting outbreaks.

Discussion:

On the number of hospital pens, some members agreed that there should be a fixed percentage of hospital places as without such a requirement this number would be arbitrary. In addition, farmers wish to know the average number of sick pens for their planning and competent authorities need a figure to be able to control the requirement. In Sweden the hospital pens must be 4% of the animal places in the farm, in Finland 5%, in Germany the national guidance for inspectors requires 5% for group housed sows and there is a recommendation for weaners and fatteners (3 % of animal places) and in Denmark there is a percentage only for the sows and gilts, combined with an horizontal requirement that there should always be at least one free hospital place to accommodate a sick animal. This latter requirement was also adopted in the German guidance for inspectors.

A few members were against defining a specific number of hospital places because there are big differences between categories of pigs and management systems e.g. when floor feeding is used for sows, there are more requirements for hospital pens than in other systems. A fixed minimum number of hospital pens, would become the standard and some farms would risk to have fewer pens than needed.

A member mentioned that the number of hospital pens should be analogous to the number of buildings.

Some members suggested that the optimal solution would be to set both a minimum percentage for the number of hospital places and the obligation to always have a free hospital place for a sick animal. This is because of the difficulty to set a threshold or rule on when it is necessary to move animals to hospital pens. Given the matter is complicated and legislation cannot cover every situation, a combination of requirements as described above would respond to the need.

Some members pointed to the investment needed to build a significant number of hospital pens, e.g. a 3% percentage applied in a farm of 2000 pigs would mean 60 hospital places, which is economically burdensome. In Italy, setting a certain number of hospital pens per building has not been feasible even in the frame of a quality scheme. Finland also received complaints by farmers in the beginning, but now it seems like farmers agree with the importance of having enough hospital places. However, members agreed that there is an important economic benefit in putting sick animals in hospital pens and treating them appropriately. Farmers realise the good economy after applying the system.

On the number of animals in each pen, some countries have set a maximum, e.g. in Denmark this number is 3 for gilts and sows (there is no limitation for other categories) while in Germany it is recommended to have small groups with no more than 5 pigs. Some farmers even have hospital pens for a single pig. The number of animals in a hospital pen follows the principal of grouping but is adapted according to each individual case, e.g. lame animals are usually in groups of 3-4 while serious diseased animals such the ones with prolapse or meningitis, should be housed alone. The maximum number is set so that the monitoring of animal health and medication is possible and also to avoid aggression, that happens every time an animal enters a hospital pen. Most of these requirements fall under good management and not legislation.

Minimum space requirements for hospital pens are necessary to ensure comfort, good access to feed and water and possibility of sick or injured pigs to move away from others. The necessary presence of a heat and cooling source also takes up more space. For pens housing single animals, the space must not be very big so that the animal can reach resources.

On other requirements for hospital pens, it is important to provide enough and suitable feeding and drinking possibilities, as very often sick animals cannot move to reach feed and water, are not hungry/thirsty and not able to fight for resources. The hospital pen must ensure that pigs are able to feed and drink without having to compete, by providing e.g. more drinkers and feeders than the normal requirement, double feed in the feeding trough or ad libitum feeding in close proximity to the sick animals. An open water surface is also recommended for easy access.

Regarding the use of sick pens, a member suggested legislation should foresee an obligation of the operator to move the sick animals to hospital pens and treat them accordingly (apart from the obligation to build enough hospital pens). This is because some farmers put animals in hospital pens without treating them.

6. Mixing pens

Presentation by the expert

The expert estimated that the provision of Council Directive 2008/120/EC, Annex I, Chapter II, paragraph D.2., is the worst implemented provision of pig welfare legislation. It sets limitations as regards the mixing of pigs and requires that when mixing happens, escape and hide opportunities should be provided. To the experience of the expert, no Member State is providing pigs with structural elements in pens.

The mixing of pigs should be allowed only a) after weaning b) in the transition from weaning to fattening facilities (at an age of 8-10 weeks) when pigs are grouped according to weight or gender and c) in hospital or separation pens. In all other times, mixing of pigs should not take place, especially at the end of weaning and the end of fattening periods.

The mixing occurs commonly under the current practices of farming. For example, the gradual selling of pigs at the end of fattening period, in farms applying an all-in-all-out approach that house pigs of the same age in different compartments, results in gathering - and therefore mixing - the last remaining pigs in one compartment in order to put new weaners in the free compartments. This is not allowed under the current legislation and should not be allowed in the future, too. The bigger space probably foreseen in the future legislation will allow for building structural elements in the pens.

Current legislation does not have requirements regarding suckling piglets, but at the time it was adopted, the mixing of piglets was not common. Today it is increasingly more common due to large litter sizes. In the expert's opinion, the mixing of piglets can be allowed for reasons of litter equalization, during the first 48 hours after birth, as the bond to the sow is not yet very strong. After this period the piglets should not be mixed, except from the case of inadequately fed piglets (not taking enough milk), which should be moved to a nurse sow. However, this latter case is an exception and can be considered similar to the mixing in a hospital/separation unit. In the future, the routine use of nurse sows should not occur, given the recent EFSA opinion strongly recommends not to have litter sizes bigger than the number of teats.

Discussion:

In general, the practice of moving and therefore mixing piglets seems common. When stock people spot a small piglet, they often move it to another sow with the aim to ensure better feeding. Since these movements are not recorded at piglet level, the next person spotting the same piglet will sometimes move the piglet again and this action can go on several times. Finland conducted a study that monitored big, commercial, piglet producing farms. Piglets were marked individually to show exactly which piglet had been born by which sow. The result of monitoring was alarming, showing that some piglets were moved up to 4 times during the lactation period.

Several members agreed that piglets should not be moved between different sows after the second day of life, mainly to avoid animal health risks. This principal is also better for productivity reasons. In case piglets exhibit different weights at the end of lactation, they can be mixed at the beginning of weaning.

Other members consider that setting a time limit for piglet movement would constitute an unnecessary restriction. They estimate that management systems move anyhow towards decreasing the movement of piglets both for health and welfare reasons. Also, they foresee problems in the potential enforcement of such a provision. The recording of movements on sow charts would show the direction of movement (from one sow to another), but not which piglet was moved.

Specifically on the need to move piglets between sows when the number of piglets is bigger than the number of sow teats (big litter sizes e.g. 16, 20 even 22 piglets), members agreed that the use of nurse sows is definitely preferable compared to the use of artificial milking systems. Again, some members stressed that a potential rule on the duration for which the piglets are allowed to be moved would be very restrictive due to the different strategies of using nurse sows.

Also a member shared that there have been good results by the addition of artificial milk in the pen, so the sow is able to nurse more piglets than her teats. There are commercially available systems for the provision of supplementary milk. Other members consider that these systems are good for uniformity of the piglets, better weight gain, higher weight at weaning and less weight loss of the sow, but cannot be used for having more piglets than teats, because a) the system alone cannot ensure the growth of the piglet and b) piglets need the teats for normal behaviour. In this sense, a member considers the system is equivalent to artificial rearing systems.

A member suggested that the design of such systems should be closer to normal behaviour of pigs, i.e. the cups should mimic the udder.

As regards rearing pigs, in farming systems with a long fattening period (e.g. more than 6 months in Italy), weight differences occur after some months of fattening despite the same genetic background of animals. In such cases it is better to form a new group, housed in a new empty pen, so as the weaker animals are housed together and eat more. Grouping together the weaker animals is considered better welfare than leaving them in their initial groups. Other members agreed that this case does not constitute total regrouping and resembles more the use of separation/hospital pens.

However, members shared that the movement of animals during the rearing phase is common, as shown also by the Finnish study. One reason to mix pigs is the difference in growth. Non-thriving pigs (that do not grow well) are constantly moved backwards and mixed with the incoming batch of pigs. Such pigs may stay for long periods in a farm, as they are simply small and do not grow much. In some Member States such as Germany, small pigs are not allowed to be killed. The opposite can also happen, i.e. larger pigs are moved forward to the next batch. From an animal health perspective, mixing older pigs with younger is worse than the opposite. There are also farms that mix pigs in the middle of the rearing period in order to have the optimal use of space.

Whatever the reason, the practice of mixing pigs was not favoured by the members, especially in view of the requirement of rearing pigs with intact tails. Even if mixed pigs have the same size, they still belong to different groups and thus, this practice has welfare complications. As with piglets, auditing the mixing of rearing pigs is very difficult in practice.

A member suggested that emphasis should be put to communication and training of farmers to apply management procedures where moving of pigs is not necessary and motivating them by showing the productivity benefits of not moving pigs. In some countries like Denmark, farmers are very conscious of the importance of not mixing pigs and have no interest to mix pigs more than necessary.

7. Group housing of suckling sows

Presentation by the expert

The German legislation was adopted last year and requires a space of 6,5m² in the farrowing pen, allowing crating for 5 days around farrowing.

As it follows from the new legislation that the sow does not need to have 6,5m² for the 5 days of confinement, some farmers consider using the traditional farrowing pens which are normally around 5m², during these 5 days. Before and after the 5 days of confinement, sows are group housed and therefore, are free to move in a space exceeding 6,5m². There is a large, international farm building company that has created and promotes a housing system with these arrangements. This system is designed so that the sows are loose in a group of 6 and then they are crated 1 day before and 3 days after farrowing.

The reasons why farmers see potential in this solution is a) they believe this system is easier integrated in the space of existing buildings, therefore the transition is easier and b) they believe the system is easily combined with outdoor access, in case there should be such a requirement for animal welfare labelling.

Competent authorities are not in favour of the system, as there is still little scientific evidence on welfare of group housed farrowing sows. The system may present benefits as piglets are housed together and they can be easily mixed after weaning. However, litters will be group housed with sows and other litters as early as the 3rd day of life, which presents challenges as the bonding with the sow and the full consolidation of the teat order takes about 7-10 days. Also, infectious diseases and especially diarrhea in the first week of life is common and piglets should not be mixed during this period. In addition, due to different farrowing times, piglets from other litters might be younger than 3 days when sows are left loose. Small piglets are very dependent on finding the heated nest and other resources and they are not yet able to circumnavigate among sows. Overall, this system is not designed on welfare basis but rather to create possibilities within existing buildings

If temporary crating is allowed in future EU legislation, the expert proposed a rule that new-born piglets must be housed individually, together with the sow and their littermates until 10 days of age. Setting a requirement for space allowance for group housing of lactating sows, was put also as a question to other members.

The federal Ministry in Germany has asked the Federal research Institute about the consequences of the newly developed system.

Discussion:

Some members agreed that this commercial system does not work well. Apart from the above observations, a member indicated that it is not easy to release the sows 3 days after farrowing and sows may be crated even for 10-15 days in this system. Also, there is no agreed figure for the needed space allowance.

Other members informed that there are well-designed systems for group housing of farrowing and lactating sows. In Finland, there is a system with getaway pens which piglets can overcome only when they are strong enough. Sows are grouped but the piglets are restricted until they get bigger and prepared to be grouped. In Sweden, there are very few group systems, completely different from the above commercial one. They comprise of small wooden nesting boxes with deep straw bedding which sows choose as nesting sites. It resembles outdoor farrowing in a hut but it is indoor. Sows are housed in the same unit beforehand and there is free space all over the pen. Piglets stay inside the wooden box up to 10 days to avoid problems with cross suckling. It is interesting that the nesting boxes are smaller than 6m², however the system works. In the Netherlands, a system similar to the Swedish has been developed. Other group housed systems are developed in Spain and Ireland, where lactating sows are kept in groups of 10-20 individuals. After weaning, sows are moved and piglets stay until they go to the fattening unit.

Several members underlined that there can be good and bad group housing systems for farrowing and lactating sows, but putting rules to avoid the bad systems could end up restricting the good ones. There is not enough information on this type of systems, other than some case studies and few good farms in a few Member States.

Another point made is that the normal farrowing legislation is built for individual farrowing and lactation and cannot be applied to systems for group housing, even to the well-functioning ones. As mentioned above, existing knowledge is not adequate to create legislation for this type of farming. If such systems develop and become common, then the legislation should adapt accordingly. A member suggested that systems derogating from individual housing should be subject to approval.

Lastly, a member underlined that crating of sows 1 day before farrowing should not be allowed as it could prohibit the expression of nest building behaviour. Sows should be confined as close to farrowing as possible. Another member is of the view that crating sows late enough to allow for nesting behaviour but in time for farrowing would not be feasible for each individual sow and that is the reason why free farrowing is preferable.