



Free Farrowing for Indoor Sows

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Confinement

Confinement of animals is of concern to many people and organisations involved throughout the food supply chain. Although in the UK a significant portion of sows are now kept outdoors in free farrowing systems, there is limited availability of suitable land on which to situate units. In many regions the climate is such that outdoor systems are simply not possible (too hot, too cold, unsuitable terrain etc.).

Consequently, a non-land-based pig production system is required that eliminates the need for confinement or mutilations.

In indoor breeding units, confinement in farrowing accommodation - a sow is normally kept in the crate for four to five weeks - is detrimental because it prevents basic movement such as walking or turning round, and it precludes virtually any kind of nest building or mothering and nurturing activity. Sows in such confined accommodation are often unable to perform any kind of rooting or foraging activity and manipulable material is rarely provided.

Keeping any animal confined for extended periods has the potential to have negative consequences for their welfare. Problems include:-

- Poor hygiene, inability to move away from excrement and increased risk of respiratory disease
- Increased risk of infections such as MMA ³, urinary tract infection
- Reduced bone density and muscle weakness through lack of exercise
- Reduced exercise is also associated with poorer farrowing ability
- Overgrown hooves and increased risk of lameness
- Sores and injuries can be seen e.g. shoulder wounds through rubbing on the crate
- An inability to fully express natural behaviours such as nest building and nursing ¹
- Social restriction, boredom and frustration resulting from an impoverished environment, can lead to stereotypical behaviours such as bar biting and sham chewing ²
- Stress caused by close confinement can result in protracted farrowing duration with consequent increases in peri and post-natal piglet death

The farrowing crate was originally designed to prevent problems associated with neonatal mortality of piglets, specifically sows lying on and squashing piglets, and to aid in the safe handling of sows. Any alternative system to the crate should therefore provide an environment where neonatal mortality is kept to a minimum and where sows can be handled safely.

The FAI response...

At FAI we have developed a system based on the use of a farrowing arc with access to an outdoor run area, located on a concrete pad, each module can be replicated in rows of adjacent arcs.

Sows enter the farrowing accommodation a few days in advance of farrowing to settle in and remain in the pen until the piglets are at least 2 weeks old. At FAI sows and their piglets are then moved to a family pen to allow the farrowing accommodation to be freed up for subsequent batches. The pen design allows the sows to perform natural nesting and farrowing behaviours, keeps the piglets inside until they are strong enough to join the herd, and is easy to clean and maintain. Sows are fed a silage based forage diet outside the arc, the piglets are able to join her to learn foraging behaviour when they are strong enough. Sows are selected to farrow with moderate litter sizes with minimal mortality.



Additional Information

FAWC Report on the Welfare of Pigs Kept Outdoors

Pig Factsheet No1 Thermal and Physical Comfort for pigs

References

1. Lawrence AB et al 1994 Applied Animal Behaviour Science 39 p313-330
2. Arey DS 1992 Applied Animal Behaviour Science 33 p217-226
3. Report of EU Scientific Veterinary Committee 1997 on Welfare of Intensively Kept Pigs, section 5.3.6
4. Beattie VE Animal Behaviour 2005



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