

Finding Balance: What is good for the animals is good for production

Barn Insights Series – Practical Solutions to Group Sow Housing (Part 1)



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When I walked into Egli's sow barn, located in Blythe, Ontario, the first thing I noticed is not the sows themselves, but the fresh air and tranquillity – no frantic bar-banging, no restless pacing – just relaxed animals rooting straw or stretching their noses into the hay bailage. For Marcel, who manages about 300 sows in a group housing system, this calmness is the proof that the extra work is worth it.

A conventional pig producer about more than 20 years ago, Marcel transitioned to group housing in 1996 and later switched to organic production. Now they have been receiving Global Animal Partnership certification for three years and supplying to a large processor in Quebec.

Individual Access Stalls: Choice & Shared Space

The barn is divided into four groups of about 70 sows, each on a five-and-a-half-week batch cycle. Pregnant sows have access to individual feeding stalls, but also a large common area bedded with straw (28 ft² of straw space/sow). This allows each sow to eat in peace, while still providing freedom to move, lie, and socialize.

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"I like feeding them individually in the mornings," said Marcel, "because I can see right away who's not eating. And I like to see they need their own space, because there are sows that eat really fast and other sows are nibblers... I have much more consistent control."

"I feel good when I look at the sows and the sows feel good."
-- Marcel Egli

Feeding is done four times a day. Each sow receives a base ration, then Marcel walks through with a cart to top up animals that need more. Marcel is also trying to feed his sows hay bailage which provides high fibre, gut fill, and an additional form enrichment. "We're supposed to eat our vegetables... They are omnivorous like us." Working with his veterinarian, they are recording and closely monitoring the sows' body condition scores to evaluate if feeding sows hay bailage can reduce the amount of concentrate feed, which can in turn reduce cost. The barn relies on natural ventilation, with limited fan use to keep noise low. Straw bedding plays a critical role in winter comfort.

Managing Workload

Batch farrowing is a conscious choice. All sows in a group farrow, wean, and move together. It means heavy weeks of work followed by quieter periods, a rhythm that suits the farm's size. "For 3,000 sows, this probably wouldn't work," he said. But in a 300-sow barn, the five-and-a-half-week cycle is manageable in terms of workloads and Marcel gets to take breaks to catch up on other farm work as he also runs his own crops operation. Cleaning and adding bedding are part of the added workload. Straw immediately behind the stalls are replaced monthly, while the rest of the straw pack is turned out only once every three months. "It is more labour [than crates]," he said, "but I feel like I get rewarded for it... I never have a sow in here that's doing [bar biting]. They don't need to do that because they're out. They have stuff to do. So I know it's the right thing to do."


Steady Performance

With Topigs genetics, litter sizes average 15-16 born alive and about 13 weaned. Fostering is used to balance litters, and creep feed is introduced early with small pellets before moving to larger feed. Weaned pigs are sold to his brother's grow-finish operation, also run under humane standards. Although no tail docking is practiced on Marcel's farm, tail biting is rarely an issue. His brother sometimes experienced minor tail biting in the nursery, but with good nursery management, it was never a major problem.

Lessons Learned

After nearly two decades with alternative housing, Marcel said the key ingredients for success are straightforward: sufficient space, adequate nutrition, right environment, and good people. He emphasized the importance of ample lying space, natural light, good air quality and understanding animal behaviour to ease handling. When asked about his relationship with his animals, he said



"You do the best that you can. It gives me a lot of pride. When I see my sows and it's quiet, I'm happy to be in the barn. If I have an employee someday, I'd like to be able to keep that employee for 10 years because they want to be here." His barn is a reminder that group housing is more than a regulatory requirement: it's a practical and profitable working system that can deliver both animal welfare and farmer satisfaction. 

Group sow housing resources at your fingertips.

sowhousing.com

has the information you are looking for.

