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Chinese Visit Pennsylvania's Pork Industry

Philip Gruber, Staff Writer Sep 18, 2017 Updated Sep 19, 2017



Kai Liu translates for Tom Parsons, director of the Swine Teaching and Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. The university hosted representatives from several of China's largest pork companies this week.

Photo by Philip Gruber

EAST EARL, Pa. — China has the world's largest pork industry, but U.S. farmers produce pigs far more efficiently.

To the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, this was an opportunity.

Penn Vet played host to about two dozen representatives from some of China's largest pork companies this week during a set of tours and lectures about Pennsylvania's pork industry.

In a presentation Tuesday morning at Shady Maple, Penn Vet researchers described strategies the state's hog producers are using to track diseases and provide for the welfare of sows.

Meghann Pierdon, assistant director of Penn Vet's Swine Teaching and Research Center, manages the online mapping tool the industry uses to track porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome, or PRRS.

It's the most economically important disease for U.S. pig producers, and the Chinese visitors indicated the disease is common in their country too.

The voluntary program allows companies to flag sites that have tested positive for the disease. Other producers — plus genetics, repair, feed and trucking companies — then know to steer clear of the area so they don't spread the disease.

More than 1.45 million swine are covered by the Penn Vet program. "We have most of the pigs in the state," Pierdon said.

The program has helped reduce the incidence of PRRS in Pennsylvania. Some other states, such as Ohio and Illinois, are developing similar programs.

The program can burnish a state's reputation for low disease rates within the swine industry. "They know (pigs) can stay healthy" in Pennsylvania, Pierdon said.

The program is also used to track porcine epidemic diarrhea virus, which was first found in Pennsylvania in 2013.

"We still have some PED in small producers, but right now the major producers in this state do not have any PED-positive sites," Pierdon said.

She also explained the American-style funding mechanism for the mapping program — the checkoff.

Producers pay a fee for every pig that is slaughtered, and Pierdon submits a request to use some of this money.

Geography plays a big role in how Pennsylvania's swine industry is organized, said Tom Parsons, director of Penn Vet's Swine Teaching and Research Center.

The state's hog industry grew up in southeastern Pennsylvania, but as the area grew crowded, companies started placing barns, especially sow houses, farther west and north in the state.

Now pigs generally move eastward across the state from the sow unit to the finisher to the slaughter plant outside Philadelphia, Parsons said.

Such large-scale planning should sound familiar to China's pig industry.

The Chinese government is in the midst of a major effort to move pig farms away from waterways and urban areas to reduce environmental problems, according to USDA.

Parsons thinks China's next change could be an increased consumer interest in animal welfare.

That dynamic, of course, is already far along in the United States, where more than 70 major food companies have said they want gestation stalls removed from their supply chains.

Some people dislike those 2-foot-by-7-foot enclosures because they do not give sows room to turn around.

In response, a number of pig producers are switching to alternative sow housing systems.

These group housing systems work because of the electronic sow feeder, which the visitors saw at a farm later in the week.

The machine provides the only alternative to gestation stalls with individualized feeding, Parsons said.

Sows are admitted one at a time into the feeder, which reads their ear tag and dishes out a ration tailored to their needs, Parsons said.

Pens with only one feeder are typically used at large farms.

The 55 to 75 sows per pen are moved in and out as a group, so the farm needs to be able to breed all those animals in a fairly short period of time, Parsons said.

Unfortunately, if a sow loses the pregnancy, her space becomes empty and stays empty for the rest of the group's pen stay. That cuts down on efficiency.

The alternative is a multiple-feeder dynamic pen housing 150 to 300 pigs, which is common at smaller farms. "There's pigs always coming in and coming out," Parsons said.

When there are more than 100 pigs in a pen, the social order becomes less rigid. "I say the sows can't remember who they don't like," Parsons said.

The frequent shifting of pigs in and out uses the space well, though it can be hard to find the right pig in such a big group, he said.

No matter the size, these group pens are generally elongated rectangles. That gives timid pigs more space to escape from aggressive pigs, he said.

This week's visit is the latest step in a program the Penn Wharton China Center and Penn Vet launched in 2015 to provide industry insights, and business and technical training to Chinese pork producers.

The program is one of several international projects for the vet school. The swine team has also been working with producers in Thailand. The dairy team has been working in several countries in Asia, Parsons said.

Joan Hendricks, the dean, has said Penn Vet could shift its focus toward these international relationships, and away from Pennsylvania, if the cash-strapped state government eliminates \$30 million in state funding for the private institution.

The China initiative predates this year's budget woes, and it's a good opportunity to develop connections in the world's biggest pork-producing country, Parsons said.

During their visit, the pork company representatives also toured Wenger Feeds in Rheems and attended lectures at Penn's Wharton School.²³

Photo by Charlene Shupp Espenshade

Chinese pork company representatives check out biosecurity equipment on a truck at Wenger Feeds in Rheems, Pennsylvania.

Photos by Philip Gruber

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Meghann Pierdon, assistant director of the Swine Teaching and Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, speaks about swine disease tracking.

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