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Farmyard Freedom Food producers are finding that animals allowed to roam can bring higher prices. Giving animals space can pay, farmers find

March 21, 2007 | By Harold Brubaker INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

They form cliques, hold grudges, and some of them will hog food, given the chance.

They are pigs, and those traits - particularly the hoggishness - are reasons most pregnant sows are kept in crates where they cannot even turn around, much less pursue the social life they crave.

But now, living conditions for thousands of sows are improving, as pork producers react to accelerating consumer rejection of what critics say is among the harshest forms of animal confinement on farms.

Story continues below.

For example, Leidy's Inc., a Montgomery County pork processor, is working with a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's New Bolton Center in Chester County to install electronic feeding systems that allow sows to live in groups, while preventing dominant sows from eating more than their share.

"The attraction of the system is we're letting pigs live their lives" socially, said Tom Parsons, associate professor of swine medicine at New Bolton.

Similar shifts away from the strictest confinement also are under way in the veal and egg industries, going against agriculture's quest for the same scale, control and efficiency that swept manufacturing and other economic sectors in the second half of the 20th century.

That process slashed the number of people needed in farming and cut the portion of income Americans spend on food, but it also distanced consumers from food production and fostered an image of idyllic farm life for animals.

"Animals confined to very restricted spaces are leading a very poor-quality life," said Claire Canonico of Collegeville. She called the movement to more humane animal husbandry a sign that "there is still a hopeful consciousness alive in America."

Generally the changes do not represent a huge shift away from so-called "concentrated animal-feeding operations," with the environmental risks of the massive amounts of manure they generate. Two poultry farmers, though, said environmental regulations were a factor in their decision to switch to cage-free laying hens.

The biggest factor for most farmers and food companies is the prospect of higher prices for eggs from hens not kept in cages or meat from animals that have more room to move around.

"I'll fill demands of what the consumer wants, as long as they are willing to pay for it," said Paul D. Sauder, president of R.W. Sauder Inc., an egg company in Lititz, Pa., with a thriving business in cage-free and organic eggs.

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