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HOG INDUSTRY MOVES CLOSER TO CRATE-FREE

ON AUGUST 06 2012.

Lancaster (Lancaster Farming, July 28, 2012): There is general agreement in the hog industry that gestation crates for pregnant sows are on their way out, and that 10 years from now, mother pigs will be living in group pens. This is a good thing, according to animal rights groups like the Humane Society of the United States, but another hit to the checkbook for many farmers who produce market hogs, according to some industry observers.

Crate-free pork production gained added traction on July 17 when Costco Wholesale, the second largest retailer in the U.S., notified its suppliers that they were joining other companies in phasing out pork purchases that could be traced back to farms using gestation crates. In that letter, the company said, "...we want all of the hogs throughout our pork supply chain to be housed in groups with access to safety zones and expect that this transition should be accomplished no later than 2022."

Craig Wilson, Costco vice-president for quality assurance and food safety, told Lancaster Farming by phone that the company is making a request of the industry, not a demand. He said they had talked to a number of universities, and have explored the issue with meat packers, the National Pork Producers Council and with Dr. Temple Grandin. "The science is still not settled," he said, "but we want good scientific practices that benefit the sow."

Wilson noted that the 10-year transition to group housing should give producers the latitude they need to transition from stalls to open pens, but that the move will be harder on small farmers than it will be on corporate producers.

Big operators can cycle loose housing into their normal capital improvement budgets. If Farm A's gestation crates were due for replacement in August, the big operator can cycle loose housing into that upgrade. Same for Farm B in September, Farm C in October and all the way to Farm Z and beyond in the years between now and 2022.

Wilson, who grew up on a farm and who raised cattle and horses for much of his adult life, said his company is very concerned with the well-being of the small farmer, which is one reason for the 10-year timeline.

Costco joins a long list of food retailers who have announced plans to eliminate gestation crates from their pork supply chains. That list includes McDonald's, Denny's, Burger King, Wendy's, Safeway, Hormel, Smithfield, Sysco and many other, less familiar names. To date, nine states have also signed on to the anti-crate trend by legislating phase-outs of gestation crates, the latest of which is Rhode Island. Rhode Island is especially interesting because there are currently no pigs living in gestation crates in Rhode Island.

The 10-year timeline is irrelevant to many Midwestern hog farmers, according to Dr. John Mabry, a professor of animal science at Iowa State University and director of the Iowa Pork Industry Center at the university.

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Going from crates to loose housing will add cost, Mabry said, particularly for smaller operators with 1,000 to 2,000 sows. A producer with 1,000 sows can't phase loose housing into his operation, according to Mabry. He'll have to shut down his business, retrofit his barns at a cost of \$400 to \$700 per sow, and end up with a facility that can only hold 800 sows. loose housing takes more space. It also takes more husbandry skills.

A free-to-move sow is a fight waiting to happen, a fact of porcine psychology that led to the adoption of gestation crates some 35 to 40 years ago.

The big guys can make the switch without much hassle, Mabry said, but small producers may find loose housing too much of a challenge. He thinks many of them will stop producing hogs, or they'll sell out to bigger operators. "One of the unintended consequences of this crate-free trend could be a move to more factory farming," he said. "I don't think people have thought enough about that aspect."

Perhaps the most visionary/trailblazing figure in the loose housing universe is Dr. Tom Parsons, director of the Swine Research and Training Center at the University of Pennsylvania New Bolton Center. Over the past decade, Parsons has led a team in what has come to be known as the Penn Vet model of swine housing. He has overseen the conversion from stalls to open pens for some 75,000 sows.

In a phone interview, he pointed out that there is virtually no scientific evidence to support the move from stalls to pens. Feed conversion ratios are the same for both methods, sow health is the same and live piglets are the same in both environments.

So while there is no practical reason to make the switch, there is a threat from the marketplace — an ultimatum, really — to move away from crates. And it's a move away from the known to the unknown, according to Parsons.

"The animal rights groups, HSUS, MFA, PETA, have told us what they don't want, but they haven't told us what they do want," Parsons said. "The decision to take away gestation stalls was not based on science. One of the things we're trying to do here at the SRTC is to find out what's acceptable. Should science play a role in what's acceptable, or should the decisions on how we produce pork be left up to focus groups and consumers?"

The question, one can assume, was rhetorical.

A computer is at the heart of the Penn Vet model. Gestation crates came into being because sows in pens fought for social standing, and the top sow ate more than the bottom sow. Often lots more, leaving the less aggressive animals with inadequate nutrition for their own bodies, much less the little pigs they were carrying.

The computer recognizes each sow through her unique ear tag, and when she shows up for dinner, the computer tells the automatic feeder how much feed to give her. Putting sows in groups bigger than half-a-dozen or so also lessens social pressure, which reduces tension, fights and injuries in the hog house.

There's plenty of science work to do in the field of loose housing, Parsons said. Research into genetic selection for calmer sows less inclined to battle is one area that's getting a lot of attention.

Nobody knows scientifically what's best for the mother sow, Parsons said, but people in academia and throughout the industry are responding to the demands of the marketplace, even though the industry and the marketplace itself don't know exactly how to frame those demands.

One thing that concerns Parsons is the possibility, remote as it may be, that producers may invest in production systems that they think will satisfy consumer sentiment, but which actually don't. It's a scary thought, he said.

Bob Ruth doesn't scare easily. He is president of Country View Farms, which produces a million-plus market hogs per year. Based in Middletown, Pa., Country View began the transition to loose housing, based at least in part on the Penn Vet model, five years ago. Currently just 30 percent of the company's production comes from gestation crates.

"I've been working with livestock my entire life," he said in a phone interview. "I'm not going to do something because somebody tells me to do it. I'm going to do what's right for the animals."

Ruth started using gestation stalls in the 1980s because the animals fared better in stalls than they did in loose housing. Technology — the computer feeding system — now lets his employees and contract farmers give his loose housing sows the same level of care that they were getting in gestation stalls.

Not better care, he points out, but the same level of care. "We couldn't give them any better care than they were getting in the stalls," he said. "It comes down to this — if we can give them the same level of care in loose housing, then why not let them move around? Our job is take care of the animals, the best way we know how, and that's what we're doing."

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