One of the unintended consequences of this crate-free trend could be a move to more factory farming. I don’t think people have thought enough about that aspect.

— Dr. John Mabry

In a phone interview, he pointed out that there is virtually no scientific evidence to support the move from stalls to pens. Feed conversion rates are the same for both methods, and sow health is the same and live piglets are the same as in both environments. So while there is no practical reason to make the switch, there is a threat from the marketplace — an marketplace that will move away from crates. And it’s a move supported by the known to the unknown, according to Parsons.

“The animal rights groups, PETA, 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 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 in pens how piglets were being raised and the bottom sows were eating more, leaving less pigs being raised and less productive than the bottom sows. This led to a move from pens to pens.

The computer recognizes each sow through her ear tag, and when she shows up for dinner, the computer tells the automatic feeder how much feed to give. Putting sows in groups bigger than the Penn Vet model or so also loses social pressure, which reduces tension, fights and injuries in the hog house. There’s plenty of science work to do in the facility 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 the industry are responding to the demands of the marketplace, even though the industry and the marketplace don’t know exactly how to frame those demands.

One thing that concerns Parsons is the possibility that, 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 the pigs housed in that 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 stall,” he said. “It comes down to this — if we can give the pigs that low level of care, 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.”