

TESTIMONY OF DR. THOMAS HOAGLAND IN OPPOSITION OF SECTION 2 OF RAISED BILL NO. 5416 BEFORE THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

PROFILE OF TODAY'S PORK INDUSTRY

Pork production has changed dramatically in this country since the early 1980s. Technology advances and new business models changed operation sizes, production systems, geographic distribution and marketing practices.

American hog farms have changed from single-site, farrow-to-finish (i.e., birth-to-market) production systems that were generally small by today's standards to multi-site, specialized farms. Still, the majority of hog farms are family-owned. The changes were driven by the biology of the pig, the business challenges of the modern marketplace and the regulatory environment. Separate sites helped in controlling troublesome and costly diseases and enhanced the effect of specialization.

SOW HOUSING

Many pork producers of all sizes and from all over the world, when allowed the choice, have made the shift to individual sow housing because of the simple belief that as animal caretakers they must do what is best for their animals. This mindset motivated farmers to move pigs from the extreme weather conditions of outdoor housing to climate-controlled buildings. It also further encouraged innovation in new housing systems to reduce fighting and allow for individual management of diets and care. While some attempt to reduce the discussion to a highly emotional argument, few understand the complexity of the issue and the evidence that supports the continued use of individual sow housing as an option for pork producers.

As the issue of sow housing continues to capture the interest of the general public and elected officials across the country, it is important to understand that sows can be housed in many different systems while they are gestating (pregnant). Decisions on welfare associated with sow housing are not a simple choice between a gestation stall and all other options.

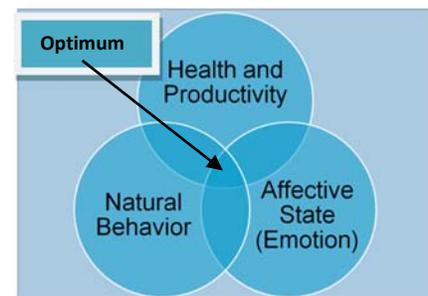
Opponents of individual sow housing attempt to use emotive arguments but offer insufficient evidence that banning certain practices would improve animal welfare. When assessing concerns about animal welfare, experts focus on three concepts. First, animals should function well in the sense of being healthy and thriving. Second, animals should feel well, especially by prevention of serious pain, hunger, fear and other forms of suffering. Third, animals should be able to live in a manner consistent with the nature of their species (AVMA, 2005)¹.

There are several peer-reviewed, published papers that have analyzed the available scientific literature on sow housing. Generally, these reviews conclude that keeping sows in any of a variety of properly maintained and operated housing systems is appropriate from a humane, as well as from a production, standpoint. Each of these housing systems has advantages, as well as disadvantages. There is no compelling evidence from the scientific comparisons that either group pens or individual stalls are a clearly superior system for the housing of pregnant sows. (AVMA, 2005; Barnett, et al., 2001; McGlone, et. al., 2004)^{1,2,4}. It is also apparent from the literature that training of animal caretakers is important to successful implementation of any of the housing systems.

Yet opponents of individual sow housing argue that one type of housing is detrimental to the health of the animals. Three separate reviews of sow housing options indicated that there is no specific health benefit to one type of sow housing over another, although McGlone, *et. al.* (2004)⁴ indicated that sows kept in stalls had lower injury scores in some body regions and maintained higher or equal reproduction performance. Additionally, Gjein and Larssen (1995)³ showed that sidewall cracks and heel lesions were more prevalent in loose-housed sows than confined sows. Von Borell, *et. al.* (1992)⁵ found no differences in adrenocorticotrophic hormone responsiveness between sows in stalls and sows in group housing.

The practice of keeping sows in stalls allows for individual care and feeding of each sow. This allows for the animal caretaker to observe each animal individually each day, ensuring that she is getting the proper amount of feed and is physically well. In contrast, housing of sows in groups can result in welfare problems because of fighting among the sows, an increase in leg and feet injuries and inability to control feed intake, with some sows becoming too fat and others not receiving enough feed.

To optimize sow housing, it is important to consider the health and productivity of the animals, the ability to express natural behavior and the affective state of the animal (see illustration). The optimization of housing systems is a dynamic process and depends on emerging technologies. This continuous improvement process is not well suited to legislation banning a certain type of system.



Supporters of banning individual sow housing options have erroneously pointed to stereotypic and oral-nasal-facial (ONF) behaviors as indicators of the supposed psychological impacts of such housing practices. To the general public and those unfamiliar with the natural behaviors of swine, these actions may seem atypical, though studies have shown that ONF behaviors are not caused by the lack of ability to turn around in a stall (McGlone, 2004)⁴. McGlone points out that non-housing-related components of a system are often responsible for the behaviors adopted by sows. The sows' inability to turn around appears to be a simple emotional argument, but the sound science behind individual housing systems is complex. This is not about the sow being able to turn around; it is about farmers' freedom to care for their animals the best way they can.

If gestation stalls are banned from use in the pork industry, it is important to understand the many unintended, yet very serious, consequences that will arise, including:

1. Farm worker injuries. Animal handling injuries are one of the most common injuries among workers on hog farms, especially when a sow typically weighs more than twice as much as a human adult. Workers may be put at increased risk of these injuries by interacting with loose-housed sows, especially as they are asserting their dominance.
2. Potential to force local, family farms out of business. Many farms in Connecticut are family-owned. Denying housing choice to farmers will result in extremely high conversion costs, jeopardizing farmers' – many of which have multi-generation farms – ability to continue farming. Those farmers who are able to withstand the transition will incur other costs – even beyond the costs to retrofit their barns – to raise their livestock, including additional labor costs and costs for additional health products. This law would produce an unfunded mandate on farmers, making it extremely difficult to obtain loans to retrofit their barns.

3. Increased aggression. Pigs tend to develop a hierarchy and social dominance very quickly in group settings. In a group, often one or two sows are very aggressive and will abuse their less dominant pen mates.
4. Less productivity. Sows in group housing may be less productive. This – and the issues previously mentioned – decreases a farmer's bottom line, and the costs ultimately will be passed on to consumers who have to pay more at the meat case. A study on the United Kingdom's ban on individual sow housing found that the pork supply in the U.K. has dropped 40 percent since the ban took effect in 1999, with a rise in pork production costs that were running 12 percent above the European Union average in 2009 and a rise in the price of pork by 25 percent between 1999 and 2004.⁶
5. Decrease in barn cleanliness. When housed in gestation stalls, each sows' eating and dunging area are separate. If gestation stalls are banned, the potential for the sow's feces to contaminate her feed is increased drastically, creating a less sanitary environment.

CONCLUSION

America's hog farmers are committed to producing safe, affordable and healthful foods for consumers, using industry practices that have been designed with input from veterinarians and other animal-care experts. Providing humane and compassionate care for their pigs at every stage of life is one of the ethical principles to which U.S. hog farmers adhere.

NPPC supports the position taken by the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Swine Veterinarians, which recognize gestation stalls and group housing systems as appropriate choices for providing for the well-being of sows during pregnancy. In fact, the organizations point out, the key factor that most affects animal well-being is husbandry skills – that is, the care given to each animal. There is no scientific consensus on the best way to house gestating sows because each type of housing system has inherent advantages and disadvantages, so no law should be imposed on the industry by activist organizations.

This ban takes away family farmers' freedom to operate in a humane way. A vote for this law is a vote restricting farmers' choice and imposing unnecessary laws and against Connecticut family farmers. Please vote against Section 2 of Raised Bill 5416.

BIOGRAPHY

I am a Professor at the University of Connecticut in the Department of Animal Science. I have worked at UConn for 34 years. I earned my Associate Degree from Northeastern University in mechanical engineering. I earned my Bachelor and Master Degrees from UConn in Animal Science. I moved to Oklahoma and earned my PhD in Reproductive Physiology at Oklahoma State University. I have attended many Local and national swine production workshops. I have been the representative from Connecticut to the National Pork Producers Meeting several times. I have been the New England based advisor for Quality Pork Production. I am currently serving my second term on the Board of Directors of the American Society of Animal Science. In this role, I have been involved with many sensitive issues which the Livestock Industry faces.

At UConn, I teach Livestock Production courses. If anyone in Connecticut calls for information about swine production, they get me. I have assigned the topic of gestation stalls as an assignment several times to my students. I make the scientific literature available to them. The majority of them conclude that gestation stalls are a viable housing system and farmers should have it as a choice.

I hope after you read this letter, you will vote to allow farmers and not legislature to make the decision of using gestation crates.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Thomas A. Hoagland in black ink, dated 3/13/2014.

Thomas A Hoagland
Chaplin, Ct

LITERATURE CITED

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