

Animal Handling Issues in the Pork Industry

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Animal handling and welfare promises to continue to be one of the greatest challenges the pork industry will have in the near to medium term. This issue has received attention from activist groups, customers, and main stream consumers. What was once thought to be merely a part of an extremist group (PETA) agenda is now mainstream.

Like broiler cages and veal barns, gestation stalls are the hallmark issue for the pork industry. Researchers are trying to use science to determine the acceptability of a wide range of facilities. However, in many cases, perceptions over rule the arguments for safe, individualized sow care that stalls can offer. For example, in December 2005, Meat and Poultry published a column by Dr. Temple Grandin where she describes her airport test which gave her informal feedback on people's negative or uneasy feelings about sows in stalls. She recommended at a minimum that stalls be properly sized and that people very actively look at group housing scenarios. In fact, this issue has become so big that it has made legislation in Florida (constitutional amendment), Arizona (pending) and New Jersey (pending). The National Pork Board and its members have been very active in seeking out research and assessments of alternatives.

A condition known as fatigued or stressed pigs continues to impact the market hog industry at transport and plant receiving. Defects associated with direct loss or associate stress cause very significant costs with an estimated total lost opportunity of \$254,104,500 or \$2.44 per head. Many things are known to impact stress in pigs throughout the entire system. Hog weights have increased ten pounds in the last (Pork Quality Survey 2004) and backfat's have continued to decline creating heavier, leaner animals. Simultaneously, USDA expectations and regulations have continued to increase as well for the handling of down and stress animals, or animals on trucks in yards.

To that end, alternative driving devices have been used to

eliminate or minimize the use of electric prods (hot shots). This reduces stress of the animals and improves meat quality, and is monitored by self audit, customer audits and FSIS. Tools such as witches capes, sort boards, rattle bats/paddles are routinely used.

Additionally, stunning has improved as have the systems leading to the stunner to reduce stress and achieve a more effective stun. Electrical stunning systems must focus on frequency (Hz), voltage, and amp and on electrode design. High frequency is used to induce cardiac arrest to minimize sensibility issues.

CO₂ stunning is now being widely used in the United States as it has been in Europe and Canada. It allows pigs to be handled in groups using automated systems which can completely eliminate the need for electric prods. In addition, there is an immediate reduction in bloodsplash and initial pH. Seasonal impacts are lessened as well, and insensibility is no longer an issue as most pigs have no discernable heart beat. Future considerations might include dwell times, gas concentrations or mixtures, and stun to stick times.

Although the industry is continually making improvements in the humane treatment and care of the animals, our customer's are now demanding documentation of production, transportation and processing procedures using certified welfare programs.

However, without unified standards customers are competing with one another to increase the requirements or program specifications. In many cases they far exceed the assurance of humane animal care but are seeking permission for the consumer to feel good about their food, or are trying to be something different than Wal-Mart.

Many welfare programs have been, or are being developed for auditing not only the processing plant, but now expanding to the transportation system and production farm. Some of these are track back onto farms where customers look for audits such as: AHA, Whole Foods, HFAC, or organic.

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