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Gilt development can be a long, complex process. But given the impact on producers and their business, this is one gilt trip that's well worth taking.

Part two: Achieving High Productivity in Group Housed Sows

Whoever said there's safety in numbers has never run with the bulls in Pamplona. But with increasing pressure from activist groups in recent years and revisions to the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Pigs, many processors now require producers to use group housing for sows rather than individual stalls. That begs the question: How do you make the change from stalls to group housing while still achieving high productivity? Fortunately, Dr. Larry Coleman, who has run a private veterinary practice in Nebraska since 1987 working mainly with swine clients, and Tim Friedel, the general manger for Thomas Livestock, have some timely answers.

The issue of whether stalls or pens are more humane is a controversial one with compelling arguments on both sides. Now that group housing is becoming the norm, that question is largely a moot point. Yet the pen system poses a number of challenges for producers. As the veterinarian for a production system in 2012 that was looking to expand, Dr. Coleman encountered several problems with group housing, and the way he confronted them may inform other producers looking at expansion or conversion of their operation.

Inaccurate feeding

Since individual feeding of sows is difficult when they have access to others sows' feed, Coleman and his team opted for electronic sow feeding (ESF), which can feed sows or gilts according to their needs. Whereas the only option for varying nutritional allotments with individually installed housing is to vary the amount of the single ration each female receives, ESF allows you to feed a combination of rations to any one female. In addition, ESF stations can weigh each sow daily and producers can use this information to determine the ideal weight gain curve for each sow during her gestational period.

Social stress

It sounds like what we experience making small talk at a party, but it can have a big impact on pig health and pork

quality. That's why Coleman addressed it on a number of fronts:

1. **Group size:** Since sows can remember a pecking order of up to 100 animals, Coleman opted for a design which included about 270 females per group, abolishing that pecking order and the stress that can accompany it.

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2. **Electronic sow feeding:** The one drawback to ESF is that there's always residual feed remaining when a sow is forced out by the sow behind her. A race track design which involved a 250 foot walk back to the front entrance of the ESF alleviated this problem for Coleman's sows.
3. **Square footage per sow:** While opinions vary on what is optimal here, too low an allotment can cause undue stress to the sows. Coleman found that 23-24 square feet per sow was a happy medium that worked for both the producer and the animals.
4. **Number of sows per ESF station:** Industry allotments range from 45-80 per station. By opting for the low end of the range, Coleman's team allowed sows to move quickly and efficiently through the stations each day, avoiding the pig equivalent of rush hour road rage.

Training difficulties

Coleman used a few strategies to deal with this problem:

1. **Early training:** Most ESF farms start training at the time of heat detection and/or potential mating ages. Instead, Coleman began at 10 weeks of age, acclimating the animals to a scale sorting system and everything that entails: Moving through pneumatic gates, being confined and learning the secret to getting food.
2. **Using a "Hog Whisperer":** Because forcing animals to adopt the ESF feeding system can be a prime source of stress, Coleman employed a "hog whisperer" to forge a strong connection with the animals and train them through trust rather than coercion. How's that for a non-traditional career path?
3. Exposure to one-way gates in the final gilt development unit (GDU): This allows them to become accustomed to unfamiliar items prior to using them on a day to day basis.

Heat detection

Detecting estrus can be difficult in large groups, so Coleman uses an automatic detection system. A boar is housed in a

detection area where visits are electronically recorded and sows determined to be in estrus are sorted into separate pens.

Sow management

Group housing requires a choice between dynamic and static groups. Coleman chose static for smaller groups and dynamic for larger ones to keep barn inventory at full capacity.

Bottom line

When he compared their loose housing system with a comparable operation using stalls, Coleman found very similar production parameters such as conception rates and litter sizes. That's good news, because it means that loose housing can fulfill the welfare demands of consumers while maintaining high sow productivity. For the industry, it's a win-win, and these days, that's rarer than a sow who's watching her weight.

Part three: Key Indicators of Breeding Herd Productivity

"If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time."

- Zig Ziglar

That could describe a typical peewee hockey game, but it's also a reminder of why benchmarking is so important in pork production. Defined by Webster as "a standard or reference by which others can be judged or measured", benchmarking is something that Ron Ketchem believes strongly in. Armed with a BS in Animal Science and a Masters in Reproductive Physiology and Animal Breeding, he worked in the swine industry for 42 years with both a genetic and feed company before purchasing Swine Management Services (SMS) - a data analysis firm - in 2002.

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