

## To Build New - or to Renovate That is the Question?

Treena Hein

The decision to build or retrofit a pig barn certainly involves many factors, but should in the end be fairly straightforward, according to Murray Elliott, a retired farm building consultant with FGC Construction based in Sebringville, Ontario.

The right choice is mostly based, he says, on taking a good, hard look at the deficiencies of your current building. Everything must be examined, from pits, perimeter walls and floors to attic spaces and roofs. "Try to start at the bottom with foundation walls and pit walls, which is difficult because they are underground or filled with manure, but needs to be done," Elliot says. "A crack that appears to be structural certainly has to be investigated, and if your pit is in bad shape, I'd say the whole structure is done. However, things like roof trusses are a different matter in that they are fairly easily replaced."



In the end, the examination will either be thumbs up or thumbs down, but before you proceed with acting on the belief that it's worthwhile to renovate, Elliot says you must decide how much compromise you are willing to make. "A lot depends on how far you want to go with the renovation," he explains. "Renovating existing structures is about compromises and the preferences of individual operators really matter. Some farmers are willing to leave poured hallways in existing structures and clean them on an ongoing basis for example, and some don't want to do that. Another situation that arises is because of where a hallway is, you might have to have, for example, a group of 30 and a group of 40 pigs in different-sized pens. That might not be a problem in Ontario where there are mostly independent farmers, but out west it's more companies that own the farms and some companies want everything uniform."



A brand new build obviously involves no compromises and takes every wish of the owner into account. And while the time length for construction is similar for a new build versus a renovation, the cost of a new build tends to be higher. However, beware that the costs of some renovations can be very high if they require a great deal of labour. One situation involving large labour costs is when there is the removal of a lot of debris required. Another is when a new pit floor must be poured inside an existing structure.

Elliot notes that in general, a renovation will be 50 to 70 per cent of the cost of a new facility, but when the costs approach the 70 per cent range, a large dose of caution is warranted. "If for example you have to change the roof five years from now, you definitely need to factor that into the renovation cost, and that will in turn change the percentage you're saving," he says. "The savings margin must be carefully looked at from every angle."

The type of production system desired must also obviously be part of the decision. Elliot says he always encourages farmers to decide on the production system they want before they call a company like his in for a farm visit to evaluate an existing barn. "There are a few ways to go to group housing, such as the use of Electronic Sow Feeders or freedom stalls, and they are very different systems and you need to know what you want ahead of time," he says. "These are big decisions for the owner. It's a matter of square footage required for the system you want, and then cost per square foot from there."

Lastly, whether you decide on a new build or the renovation of an old barn, it's critical that adequate internet accessibility, online monitoring and automation for water, feed and ventilation, including carbon dioxide monitoring, is included.

Elliot concludes that in the end, if you have a facility and it's in good shape, "there's certainly some value there that's often possible to salvage, so the advantage of a renovation is reduced cost. However, you need to be very clear on how much life is left in the parts that won't be renovated. A thorough investigation of the state of the current building is critical."

Looking for additional resources on converting to Group Sow Housing? A number of resources are available that will help you throughout the decision making process.

### **National Sow Housing Conversion Project (NSHCP)**

A project funded through Swine Innovation Porc brings together multiple sites across Canada, it is a collaborative research project that brings together the latest scientific, industry and government expertise on group sow housing and what is needed for successful barn conversions. Learning from producers that have made the jump to group sow housing, the NSHCP project, provides tools that are essential for make the conversion to group sow housing a successful one.

<http://groupsowhousing.com/>

### **Group Sow Housing Meetings**

Taken place this past September (Winnipeg, September 12 and Strathmore, September 13) the meetings brought together experts the areas of construction/renovation, technology/innovation, nutrition and systems, science and behaviour to speak directly about the conversion to group sow housing. Information from the meeting, both presentations and video format are available.

<http://www.prairieswine.com/successfully-converting-to-group-sow-housing/>

### **Science of Ethology**

Whether you are looking at a competitive or non-competitive feeding system, building new or renovating this publication will take you through the pros and cons of individual systems. Providing key information in helping individuals choose the right system that is the right fit for their operations.

<http://www.prairieswine.com/the-science-of-ethology/>

### **Transitioning to Group Housing: Everything You Need to Know**

There are a number of factors producers need to take into consideration when undertaking a conversion. Training, choosing a feeding system, what's involved with retrofitting, and technology and innovation are all important pieces producers need to consider in order to make a successful jump to group sow housing.

<http://www.cdpq.ca/specialized-reports/sows-in-group-housing.aspx>

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