3 LESSONS LEARNED AFTER THE OBLIGATION IN THE EU OF HAVING THE PREGNANT SOWS HOUSED IN GROUPS

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When in 2001 a new animal welfare regulation was approved for the member states of the European Union, applicable to new farms from 2005 on, and all existing ones from 2013 on, we all rushed to inform us about it. Among other things, they told us that the pregnant sows were to be confined in groups from the fourth week after insemination until a week before delivery.

Many argued that the new law would lead to an increase in production costs that would provoke a significant loss of competitiveness of EU pig producers.

After more than 5 years of widespread application, it has been shown that this has not been the case, in fact, productivity has increased significantly, which has reduced costs. How has this been possible?

It seemed that keeping the sows in a group would increase the aggression between animals and the number of abortions, which would lead to a lower birth rate and decrease the average numerical productivity per sow.

FIRST LESSON

With an adequate design and availability of space in the pens, the sows not produce less, but, on the contrary, produce more. The greater well-being of the animals, and their better physical form, have led to an increase in prolificacy, without diminishing fertility at birth, with the consequent reduction in the cost of production per weaned piglet.

It is important that the animals have enough space and properly define the rest, dirt and feeding areas. The minimum spaces stipulated by the legislation seem to be sufficient (1'64m2 per gilts and 2'25m2 per sow (10% more for groups of less than 6 animals and 10% less for groups of more than 40). Static groups (formed by animals from the same breeding batch) are easier to manage than dynamic ones (formed by animals from different batches), since they allow smaller groups formed with animals of similar size and parity.

The dynamic groups work well if they are large enough, so that there is no excessively strong hierarchy and animal changes can be made without problems following a correct protocol.

It seemed that feeding the sows in group would increase competition for food and entail an irregular diet, not adjusted to the individual needs of each animal. This would lead to smaller size at the birth of the piglets of the undernourished sows, and maternity problems with the supercharged sows. In turn, there would be a general increase in the food dispensed, due to greater energy consumption, overfeeding and the increase in waste due to excessive competition when eating.

SECOND LESSON

With the proper feeding and handling systems, you can get the sows to eat quietly without competing. Total consumption is similar to individual confinement systems, and any increase in consumption is compensated by the increase in numerical production.

In simultaneous feeding systems, it is important to feed the sows several times a day, in order to not dispensing too large quantities of food, so that the difference in the speed of intake between animals means that when they finish, they disturb the sows still eating.

It is important to have a separation between the feeding spaces, at least for head and shoulders. Trickle feeding systems can cause problems adjusting the feed flow, since animals that eat fast become nervous if the feed goes too slow, and can disturb other animals in the group.

Simultaneous feed systems only allow feeding the same amount of feed to each animal in the pen, so it is important that they are sorted according to their food requirement and size, so the groups cannot be very large.

Individual feeding systems through electronic chip recognition are the only ones that allow us to adjust the feeding to each individual, making possible large groups of animals, maximize productive results and individual control, and minimize waste. These systems require a training of the animals to their use.

It seemed that the decision had been taken arbitrarily by politicians moved by a public opinion that does not know the reality of the sector, and without taking into account their needs.

But the European Commission drafted the new directive after multiple consultations with different organizations involved in the sector, both public and private, and relying on results of experiments carried out by different research groups. It is important that we all work together so that this continues, and that the decisions are taken with a scientific basis and for the benefit of all, consumers, producers and animals.

THIRD LESSON

A problem is always an opportunity to improve, unfortunately we rarely evolve without the appearance of an external force that causes it.

We tend to overestimate our position, because it bothers to leave our comfort zone, but that is the way to grow.

In fact, one of the reasons why European pig farming has reached such high levels of productivity and sustainability is due to problems such as shortage of labor, lack of land, high price of raw materials, high energy costs, high concentration of population, demand by local consumers of high sanitary standards and food safety, etc.

This has made us a role model for anyone who wants to undertake a sustainable high-yield swine production.