

National poll shows support for stall ban

- Thirty-four states indicated support rate at 60% or higher.
- Ban supporters utilize intelligent ballot language.
- Throwing money at the issue not best industry response.

By CLIFF GAULDIN*

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IS the future safe for sow gestation stalls anywhere in the U.S.? The answer might be "no," according to a Michigan State University researcher who has polled the nation.

"I'm confident that a ballot initiative prohibiting use of gestation stalls would pass in nearly every state in the union," said Dr. Glynn Tonsor of Michigan State's department of agricultural, food and resource economics.

Tonsor's poll, conducted last summer, showed that nearly 70% of the respondents would vote in favor of a ban on gestation stalls. While Tonsor warned against drawing state-specific conclusions, residents in 34 states indicated support for a ban at rates of 60% or higher.

The survey also concluded that residents were insensitive to the amount of time producers would be given to come into compliance with new laws. That is, residents are just as likely to support a ballot giving producers two years as one giving producers 12 years to come into compliance.

Tonsor said swine industry decision-makers should note this finding as it suggests that the first voice heard in the debate on gestation stalls could significantly influence the compliance timetable.

"In particular, the industry could consider seeking longer adjustment timetables as this increases flexibility of producers who must adjust their practices," he said. "This is important as banning gestation stalls in itself says little about the preferred alternative housing methods of typical voters and consumers. This additional information is imperative for appropriate producer adjustment decisions."

Impulse voting

California's Proposition 2 was approved by 63% of voters last November -- the same margin of victory for Arizona's related Proposition 204 in 2006.

Intelligent ballot language utilized by supporters of sow stall bans makes it a simple decision for most people who see little reason not to support a proposed ban, according to Tonsor.

"Who wants to say they're against proper animal care? The majority of the public sees little reason not to support these bans," he said.

"I don't believe the average person thinks about the unintended consequences of banning a practice such as gestation stalls. It is impulse voting, which we all do on some issues we are less informed or aware of, whether we're willing to admit it or not," Tonsor explained. "For instance, nearly all of us are guilty of having voted on a political issue without fully understanding the issues at hand. No matter how uniformed, our voting participation and the perceptions we held at the time are influential. This closely mimics the dynamics of an average resident's behavior in voting on ballot initiatives concerning animal welfare."

The public isn't willing to invest the time and energy that would be required to bring about full understanding of the issue, according to Tonsor.

"It takes a much more in-depth discussion to really get at all the intricate details of this truly complex issue, and most of the public isn't willing to commit that kind of time," Tonsor said.

Consumer perception questions were included in his survey in an attempt to figure out which associations the public makes with the use of sow stalls.

"The public associates use of gestation stalls with lower food safety, larger farm size and corporate ownership," said Tonsor. "The perceptions people hold are what really drives their voting behavior, regardless of how scientifically valid or accurate these perceptions are."

The underlying question is how the pork industry should deal with these perceptions, Tonsor said.

"For instance, the industry needs to develop an effective strategy to address the perception of negative food safety consequences for pork produced using stalls. This is difficult, as consumer perceptions are unobservable, but very important in driving consumer decision-making. This creates challenges for all entities interested in identifying individuals more or less in agreement with their missions."

Industry response

Noting that the industry has, in general, chosen to fight sow stall bans in the past, it might be time to adopt a different strategy, according to Tonsor.

"I think it would be futile for the livestock industry to fight change at all cost," Tonsor said. "Simply throwing money at the next Prop 2 is probably not the best use of resources."

In addition to ballot initiatives, key supply chain participants are requesting a change in production practices as they increasingly want to source from crate-free producers, Tonsor noted. Accordingly, he said it is probably time to seriously consider what a second-best option may look like.

"Such a strategy may focus on seeking more favorable terms of adjustment, such as longer compliance timetables, rather than (producers) fighting ballot initiatives themselves," said Tonsor. "Similarly, it wouldn't be surprising to see some states seek pre-emptive legislation in advance of ballot initiatives."

In either case, Tonsor noted that the industry has to be willing to give up something.

"To date, I don't think the industry has decided if it is willing to consider a second-best option nor what it is willing to give up in negotiations," he said.

The bottom line, Tonsor noted, is that "the industry needs to accept that change regarding gestation housing is here to stay. The sooner this is accepted throughout the industry, the sooner producers can collectively make improved decisions regarding how best to respond."