

Implications of a Future Ban on Gestation Crates in Michigan

The majority of consumers would be in favour of a ban on sow crates during pregnancy, and this would come as no surprise to producers, writes Jackie Linden, editor of ThePigSite, in a report of the findings from a survey by Michigan State University on the attitudes of producers and consumers.



Dr Glynn Tonsor, Michigan State University

The growing interest among consumers of how their food is produced is becoming an ever more important issues. In the pig industry in the US, the issue receiving most attention is that of stalls during pregnancy.

Dr Glynn Tonsor of Michigan State University has published two articles in the latest issue of *MSU Pork Quarterly* and given a presentation at the 2008 Agricultural and Applied Economics Association meetings in July 2008 describing his research in this area. He and his MSU colleagues, Nicole Olynk and Dr Christopher Wolf, surveyed producers and consumers into their attitudes to gestation crates for sows and in so doing, made some interesting discoveries. Each survey offered seven options so that respondents could score their reaction from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely).

Producers' Survey

Respondents

Following mailing in December 2007, survey returns were received from 113 Michigan pig producers. Of the respondents, 57% (n=65) had sows in farrow-to-finish, farrow-to-weanling, or farrow-to-feeder systems.

The survey was designed to find out from producers their current operation practices, adjustments that may be necessary if gestation crates were to be banned and their perceptions of future consumer pressure.

Around one-third of the producers with sows were using individual crates as the primary method of housing sows/gilts during gestation. This, Dr Tonsor notes, is a much lower proportion than the state average from other surveys.

The use of gestation crates was more common for larger operations: for every additional 1,000 sows an operation had, the operation was 25% more likely to use gestation crates.

Chances of a ban on gestation crates within 3 years

In response to the question, "How likely do you think it is that legislation will pass in Michigan within the next 3 years that bans the use of gestation crates?" 49% of respondents replied it was unlikely, while 27% thought it was likely.

When asked about the likelihood of a national ban on gestation crates, 58% thought it was unlikely and 26% thought it was likely.

These results are consistent with those at other state-wide meetings, Dr Tonsor noted.

He said, "Collectively, these responses suggest that Michigan swine producers are notably more pessimistic about the probability of a Michigan gestation crate ban than they are a national ban.

"Facility age was identified as an operation characteristic associated with these perceptions. In particular, for each additional 5 years of age in an operation's facilities, producers responding in the mail survey were found to be 6.2% more likely to indicate a ban in Michigan is more probable than a national ban."

Cost implications of a ban

The survey asked a series of questions about the production cost implications of a gestation crate ban. There was wide variation in reply to the question "How much do you think it would cost your operation in one-time adjustment costs to update your production practices to be in line with the (gestation crate) ban?" The responses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mail Respondent Perceptions of Gestation Crate Ban Adjustment Costs (n=65)			
One-Time Adjustment Costs		Ongoing Annual Costs Increase	
\$0	47%	0%	50%
\$1-\$19,999	15%	1-5%	15%
\$20,000-\$59,999	9%	6-10%	15%
\$60,000-\$79,999	0%	11-15%	8%
\$80,000-\$199,999	9%	16-20%	9%
\$200,000 or more	21%	Over 20%	3%

Nearly half (47%) of responding producers with sows indicated that no adjustment costs would occur. Conversely, 32% responded with valuations of up to \$200,000 and 21% indicated adjustment costs in excess of \$200,000.

"This wide diversity in responses was likely reflective of underlying differences in existing operations and current extent gestation crates were being utilized," Dr Tonsor explained.

As anticipated, operation size was found to be positively related to adjustment costs. For each additional 1,000 sows/gilts an operation had, it was 39% less likely to indicate \$0 adjustment costs and 16% more likely to indicate adjustment costs in excess of \$200,000.

"The weighted average response of \$60,588 is an estimate of what a representative producer stated may be the one-time adjustment cost of banning gestation crates," Dr Tonsor said.

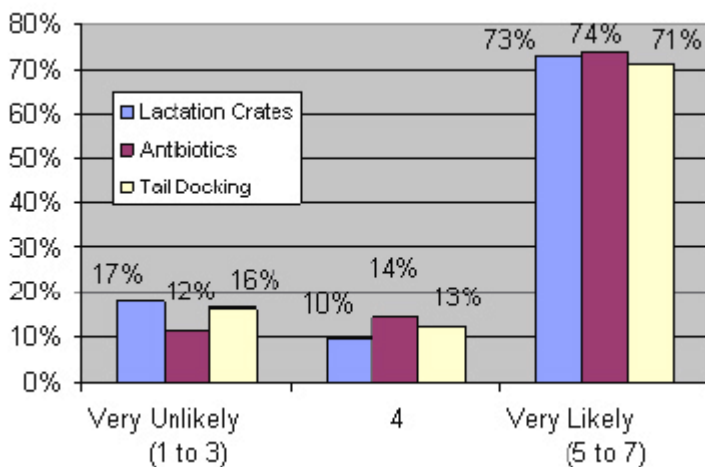


Figure 1. Mail Respondent Perceptions of a 'slippery slope' (n=110)

When asked a similar question regarding ongoing, annual production cost increases, there was again a wide variation in responses. Half of producers indicated 0% increases in annual costs, 30% indicated 1-10% increases, 17% suggested increases of 11-20%, and 3% implied increases in excess of 20%. The weighted average response was 5% for the producers surveyed.

Would a ban on gestation crates lead to other bans?

The final portion of the mail-based survey asked producers three questions to identify current perceptions of 'slippery slope' issues. Producers were asked how likely they felt consumers who support legislative gestation crate bans are to also support legislation banning lactation crates, antibiotics and tail docking.

The results in Figure 1 show the producers responded to these three issues rather equally, with 71-74% considering each of the three potential bans likely to be supported" by consumers supporting gestation crate bans.

Consumer Survey

Reasons for not purchasing pork

The same researchers surveyed 100 consumers, and they were surprised to find that only 3% indicated animal welfare was the primary reason for not purchasing pork. 'Price of pork' was given as the reason by 25%, and 'preparation time/ease' by 11% of those not buying pig meat.

Reliability of information sources

Asked about the reliability of information on animal welfare from different sources, Dr Tonsor must have been pleased to find out that university scientists were perceived to offer more accurate information than consumer groups, governmental agencies or animal industry sources.

Dr Tonsor suggested that these responses imply two important things for the animal industry. Firstly, additional efforts may be necessary to enhance perceptions of accuracy provided by the industry on animal welfare issues - and this is not unique to animal agriculture - and therefore, that third-party verification is considered more reliable than self-verification procedures.

"Secondly," he said "these differences may imply that the animal industry should work more with other entities (including university researchers) in future responses to animal welfare concerns."

Intentions on future votes on welfare issues

Consumers were asked if they would vote for a referendum, similar to those approved in other states, that if passed would prohibit Michigan swine producers from using gestation crates.

Table 2 shows that 54% of respondents indicated they would vote in favour of such a referendum.

An investigation of the reasons for consumers deciding for or against a ban revealed that women and those perceiving agriculture to make a lower contribution to Michigan's economy would tend to vote for a ban on gestation crates. Conversely, those currently consuming pork more frequently are notably less likely to support a ban.

The consumers were generally well informed about the importance of agriculture to the economy of Michigan - where it is the second largest contributor.

This led Dr Tonsor to comment, "Attempting to impact potential voting behaviour of Michigan consumers by further enhancing knowledge of agriculture's contribution to the state's economy may be a difficult and not necessarily most effective strategy."

Table 2. Animal welfare voting responses			
	MI Gestation Crate Ban (n=210)	MI Lactation Crate Ban (n=114)	MI Gestation Crate Ban Given More Labelling (n=114)
Against	46%	32%	16%
For	54%	68%	84%

Consumers revealing support for a gestation crate ban were subsequently asked two additional questions:

- "Would you also support a referendum banning the use of lactation crates (crates housing an animal during the birthing and nursing stages of production) by Michigan pork producers?" and
- "Would you change your vote to against a ban if all pork products in the US include more complete labelling information that accurately depicts if gestation crates were used?"

The results are shown in Table 2. Nearly 70% of those revealing support for a gestation crate ban in Michigan subsequently revealed support for a lactation crate ban. Similarly, 84% of the gestation crate supporting respondents revealed that availability of additional labeling indicating use of gestation crates would not cause a change in voting behaviour.

Dr Tonsor said, "Combined, this suggests that banning gestation crates (or voluntarily providing associated pork labelling) may not be sufficient to appease current animal welfare concerns of Michigan consumers currently supportive of gestation crate bans."