

Production Preview

Lameness Tops Welfare Concerns

Ranking welfare concerns is a difficult topic in swine production. Though there has been much emphasis on evaluating whether or not different circumstances are contrary to the welfare of pigs, it has been more difficult to rank the importance of different detrimental conditions. It is difficult to rank welfare concerns as they cover a broad range of concerns about the state of the animal, and the prevalence of conditions vary from farm to farm.

Yet welfare concerns must be ranked on the basis of effect and manipulability. Farming is an economic exercise that must use resources as efficiently and effectively as possible. This includes the application of resources to the welfare of animals. Incorrect application of resources compromises the competitive capability of the farm and the welfare of the animals on the farm. For sows, lameness may be one of the more important, if not the most important, welfare concern in our sow population. Here are some reasons to consider.

Curtis (2008) argues that a central focus of welfare management should be on performance measures, as these measures are a function of the welfare state of the sow. Taking this position a step further, the extent of the insult should correlate with the change in sow performance. In our studies, we have not seen a common insult to the sow that has as profound an effect upon reproductive performance as the existence of lameness.

Lameness is mediated through higher levels of removals, both directly through culling or death due to lameness, but also indirectly through removals due to poor reproductive performance. As well, we see poor performance in sows that have been diagnosed as lame if they remain in the herd. This combination of effects results in a relationship of lameness and productivity that cannot be replicated with other common conditions.

The relative importance of pain is extremely subjective. Webster's five freedoms suggest there are a number of adverse conditions for pigs. They range from hunger and thirst to frustration to pain. There has been some work on operant behavior in sows concerning hunger and boredom, but little has been done on the subject of pain. Yet, it is evident from sow behavior that considerable resources will be used to avoid painful scenarios.

The delivery of lame and downer livestock to sales barns and slaughter plants has been a focus of concern in the past year. This increased concern and scrutiny has resulted in a discount of lame sows when they are delivered to markets, but it has also resulted in an increased focus on the management of lame sows within the herd.

One real concern is that it appears group housing often increases the likelihood of lameness. The challenge is the lack of a simple, single factor answer to the improvement of welfare. As mentioned, the improvement of the welfare of sows has to be performed within the confines of economic realities.

We believe the financial effects for the owner, the enjoyment of the herdsman or herdsman, and the welfare of the sow in regard to the effects of lameness are underestimated. When such opportunities arise for win-win scenarios, these should be

followed, emphasized and proclaimed by the swine industry.

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