



by Marlys Miller
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Forcing the hand

Okay, we've all heard Smithfield Foods' decision to stop using gestation-sow crates within the next 10 years. We're also aware that Canada's leading producer, Maple Leaf Foods, quickly moved to mirror that strategy. In all, those decisions will directly affect some 1.12 million sows.

The companies cited customers' desires for a more "animal-friendly form of sow housing" as reasons for the move. Hey, the customer is always right, remember? If you don't, take a few minutes to reflect back on the U.S. auto industry's decline over the last 30 years. The industry repeatedly ignored what customers said they wanted, and finally the customers turned to other providers.

Now, I'm not suggesting that U.S. consumers are clamoring for changes in gestation-sow housing. Most don't give gestation crates one minute of thought — until someone raises the issue. That's when they scratch their heads and say, "You mean the sows live in the crates all their lives?" Once they get to that point, you can explain away, but they don't care about what you have to say.

U.S. consumers do care about actions on the farm. They have certain expectations in terms of your responsibilities for animal care. Of course, your customers reach beyond the consumer and on to grocers, chefs and others in the food sector, which carry the bigger sticks.

Looking broader still, there's more than U.S. customers at stake. U.S. meat consumption has been in the doldrums, and U.S. pork producers have shipped all of the recent years' production increases overseas. Not all of those markets will blink an eye at

animal-welfare concerns, but some significant ones will. Your competitors in other countries, namely the European Union, will finalize their gestation-crate ban by 2013.

So, it was a marketing decision for Smithfield and Maple Leaf, not an animal well-being decision. I can say that because there's no proof that the animal well-being edge goes to either a well-run, group sow-housing system or individual gestation crates. The key words being "well run."

Now, there's nothing wrong with a business responding to its customers' desires. Identifying a market and meeting the needs is at the top of any business strategy. The problem and concern is that this move pretty much forces the rest of the industry's hand; and it won't appease the activists for long.

The Humane Society of the United States jumped out quickly to challenge other U.S. pork producers to ban gestation crates in five years. HSUS was giddy over Arizona voters' decision last November to ban gestation-sow crates, following the 2002 victory in Florida. It vowed to expand the effort to other states for the 2008 elections. Having grown to 10 million members, and expanding its coffers, HSUS is eyeing the 2007 Farm Bill, as well. Also, the word is that Reps. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) and Chris Shays (R-Conn.) will introduce the Farm Animal Stewardship Purchasing Act, designed to restrict federal government food programs from purchasing pork from producers using gestation crates, among other stipulations.

What's being lost in all of these actions is the animal's well-being. Making broad-

sweeping decisions on how animals should or should not be raised is not a solution. Animal husbandry is about an individual's ability to care for and tend to animals; and we all know how people differ. That's true even within a "standardized" production system, whether Smithfield and Maple Leaf officials admit it or not.

EDITORIAL

Thirty years ago, gestation-sow crates came on the scene as a way to manage growing herd sizes and a dwindling labor force. Gestation crates do keep sows from fighting; they provide a controlled breeding and embryo implantation environment; they enhance individual sow care; and they create a safer work environment. Are they perfect? No.

Developing a skilled work force and retaining that work force is already a major industry obstacle. In the next 10 years, the labor force, regardless of the skill level, is going to tighten dramatically. Few producers have group-gestation knowledge or experience.

Add that up, and you have to wonder about the prospects of the sows' well-being.

Can we find more answers to the gestation issue? Yes — within 10 years, I wonder. Sow research takes the greatest chunk of time and money to complete. More importantly, we all have to understand that there's no single solution, and people are the make-or-break part of the equation.

Smithfield said its actions are not meant to imply that anyone else had to do the same. Maybe not, but it's sure to force the hand. **PK**