

Rush to group sow housing makes no sense

By **STANLEY E. CURTIS***

MARK Twain, at the time very much alive, once remarked: "The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated." Something analogous should be said now about crates for accommodating dry sows.

The emergence now afoot in some quarters of the U.S. pork industry of an apparent rush to convert from gestation crates to group housing of sows alarms me. Coming in the wake of a stunning sow-crate referendum defeat in a desert state, such talk might not be surprising, but it concerns me greatly because in the first place, in my opinion, such a change would not at all be in the sows' best interests.

No existing system of group housing of sows anywhere on Earth of which I am aware results in a sow's state of being as high as that engendered by an appropriately designed and operated crate in an otherwise supportive environment.

Animal scientist John McGlone of Texas Tech University recently wrote a commentary published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* (229 [9] 1229+, 2006). It was based on a thorough evaluation of his observations of the group housing system, known as the "Swedish deep-bedded system," that has been touted by U.S. animal protection advocates (e.g., the Animal Welfare Institute) as the route the world's swine producers ought to be taking.

McGlone concluded: "In my opinion, sows in the gestation crate system have superior overall animal welfare compared with sows in the Swedish deep-bedded system."

Interestingly, now that they have had some experience with group housing, European producers themselves have concluded much the same thing, whether the system employs deep bedding, solid concrete or slotted concrete.

Those who had previous experience with gestation crates now acknowledge the clear advantages the crate allows when caring for females of a species that is notoriously feisty and that, for well-documented biological reasons in terms

of longevity and fecundity, is being limited only roughly one-third of its voluntary feed intake.

There exist clear indicators of seriously compromised state of being in some of the sows in any group kept in a commercial setting. Unequal access to both feed and preferred, suitable resting places in group settings results in the apparent emotional upset, obvious severe wounds and great variations in sow bodyweight and body condition that accompany bossing and fighting.

Sows are innately unequipped to live amicably in groups with which they have not grown up. Sows' dominance hierarchies are notoriously unstable when groupings are imposed upon the sows.

In wild, feral and even large, extensive outdoor-production situations, if left to their own resources over time, sows ordinarily organize themselves into groups of around six individuals with whom they hang out. Importantly, all members of such a group are related in a maternal line.

There is one matriarch plus her daughters and granddaughters and perhaps great-granddaughters — that is, one matriarch and several siblings, nieces and cousins, all having known and lived with each other ever since a few days after they were born and started to wander away from the nest. This is the pig's strongly engrained, natural way of sociobiology.

Because we have not focused on these traits, the artificial selection pressure we have placed on swine in the last century or so has done little or nothing up until now to neutralize those instincts.

It would be a logistical nightmare and a practical impossibility to accommodate such social groupings in a commercial pork production setting.

Where sows that are unfamiliar with and unrelated to one another are being kept, the wisest solution in terms of sow state of being and, therefore, sow health, productivity and profitability is to keep those sows in individual accommodations designed so the animals can move around to some extent and have some voluntary social contact with neighbors if they so choose. (By the way, such a design already exists and has proven to be useful when designed, constructed and operated correctly, but it has not yet been widely adopted.)

In my opinion, it would be a tragic mistake to ignore common observations, common sense, natural history and scientific evidence and try to force nature in a direction it really does not want to go, all simply so as to pander to the unreasonable demands of a relatively small number of Americans. This is especially so because those who are doing the demanding, first and foremost, wish to do away with human foods of animal origin.

Does it make any sense for the pork industry to follow the advice of people who are inexperienced in swine care and management and uneducated in animal science and veterinary medicine? Does it make any sense for the pork industry to follow the advice of people who are dead set on seeing vegetarianism prevail and become the law of the land?

Might it just not be that part of those activists' strategy is to promote the use of a system of sow-keeping that they have good reason to believe ultimately will fail ... and the whole pork industry with it?

A digression: We should be well advised to heed what we can learn from an episode in the Kingdom of Sweden that took place several decades ago, when it went through a government-engendered debacle in animal agriculture.

For a while at that time, the Swedish government, in its finite wisdom, required farmers, who wanted the federal government to underwrite construction loans to build cow barns, to scrupulously follow government-supplied blueprints to a tee. Every cow barn in Sweden eventually was going to be an exact copy of every other one.

When these edifices were put into use, however, before long, the dairymen and veterinarians there started to observe sickness, lesions and mortality rates in the cows such as they had never seen before.

As it turned out, to make a long story short, those government-approved blueprints called for a cow zone at ground level and, below that, a tank for the anaerobic storage of manure, ... but they did not call for a gas trap in the pipe that led from the cows to the tank.

The hydrogen sulfide being aspirated through that straight pipe directly from the tank of decomposing manure into the cow zone was poisoning the animals. To this day, the scientific literature documenting that episode serves as the

*Dr. Stanley E. Curtis is with the University of Illinois.

classic description of hydrogen-sulfide poisoning in cattle.

The lessons to be learned:

- First, the government does not always know what is best for the animals (and neither do animal protection organizations).

- Second, it is dangerous when governments and coalitions of governments get into the business of prescribing “engineering standards” for any kind of animal facility. (What is useful instead are “performance standards.”)

Before the U.S. pork producers overreact to events on the political scene by throwing in the towel on crates and picking up the ill-advised and ill-fated

banner for group housing, there should be open, transparent and widespread discussions — by any and all concerned and interested — of the pros and cons of those two general approaches as well as subsequent thorough scientific investigations of ways to improve the specific features of the overall system that comes out on top as a result of that assessment.

Finally, it is important that we acknowledge the fact that the design and operation of any animal accommodation must be right to be holistically useful, and gestation and farrowing crates are no exceptions. They come in various sizes and designs and, yes, colors, but:

- Not all perform well.
- Not all are operated correctly.
- Not all support a high state of being in the sow.

- Not all support a high rate of performance by the sow, though some certainly do.

Scientific evidence already exists to support these statements. Why are we not taking advantage of that knowledge by getting it out, dusting it off and applying it? Why are we seriously contemplating rushing to embrace and adopt a system of sow-keeping that neither engenders in the sows a high state of being nor results in the strongest possible bottom line?