

Saving Their Bacon

Why Europe Must Ban Sow Stalls



A Chance for Change

With the European Union now conducting a review of its pig welfare law, we have a unique opportunity to ban sow stalls throughout the EU and to ensure that, wherever possible, straw or other suitable bedding material is provided for the animals.

The popular perception of pig farming - contented pigs roaming around and rooting in the soil - could not be further from the truth for many pigs in Europe. Around half of the European Union's (EU) breeding sows - including many in the Republic of Ireland - are kept throughout their pregnancies in narrow stalls. These are in reality no more than cages. 6 million sows are caged in this system on Europe's factory farms. They are unable to exercise or even turn around for nearly four months at a time. (Breeding sows are the mothers who produce piglets for the meat industry.)

Impatient at the slow progress in Europe, and aware of widespread public feeling against sow stalls, a number of countries have taken a lead on this issue. Sow stalls have already been banned in the UK and Sweden. Laws have also been passed to end this system in Finland, the Netherlands and Denmark; their bans come into force in 2006, 2008 and 2014 respectively. An EU-wide ban on sow stalls is needed urgently to stamp out this cruelty once and for all.

Sow stalls are so narrow that the sow cannot even turn round. She is confined in the metal-barred stall on a hard concrete floor throughout her 16½-week pregnancy. And for pregnancy after pregnancy. In short, for most of her adult life.

The European Commission's Scientific Veterinary Committee has condemned sow stalls on cruelty grounds, concluding that they cause "serious welfare problems" and that "sows should preferably be kept in groups".

Thankfully, Europe's pig welfare law is now being reviewed. This represents a golden opportunity to help stop the suffering of millions of caged sows, and to ensure that sow stalls are replaced by practical, economic and more humane alternatives throughout the whole of Europe.

Spanish sow stall



Caged & Pregnant

Sow stalls are in widespread use on intensive pig breeding farms in many European countries. The sow is caged in a metal-barred stall, so narrow that she cannot turn around, let alone exercise. A typical stall measures 0.6 to 0.7 metres wide and about 2 metres long - just bigger than the sow herself. She will simply stand or lie in one place throughout her 16½ week pregnancy until ready to give birth. And for pregnancy after pregnancy. In short, for most of her adult life. Even the floor is an uncomfortable combination of concrete and slats. No bedding material is usually provided.



Caged sows in Republic of Ireland

No wonder then that caged sows often suffer a range of health problems. Compared with those kept in humane alternative systems, caged sows are more likely to suffer foot injuries, lameness, and long-term pain from infected cuts and abrasions. Lack of exercise leads to weakened bones and muscles. Being unable to move freely also causes greater levels of urinary infections. Heart problems, too, can develop.

“The food provided for dry [pregnant] sows is usually much less than that which sows would choose to consume, so the animals are hungry throughout much of their lives.”

Scientific Veterinary Committee report, “The Welfare of Intensively Kept Pigs”, 1997.

Caged sows commonly carry out meaningless, repetitive motions - such as bar biting - known as stereotypies. Experts regard these stereotypies as outward signs that the animals are under stress and suffering. These are the only means available for the desperately frustrated sow to attempt to ‘cope’ with her confinement. A newly caged sow’s initial reaction to confinement is to try to escape. She then appears to quieten down and often becomes abnormally inactive and unresponsive. The EU’s Scientific Veterinary Committee (SVC) says this indicates that the sow may well be clinically depressed.

As if all this were not bad enough, many breeding sows are also kept hungry throughout much of their lives. Restricted rations of concentrated feed are the norm. These provide for the nutritional requirements of the sow, but lack the bulk or roughage needed to satisfy her hunger. Being caged means that she has no opportunity to search for more food. Clearly, keeping her hungry in this way can only add to the misery of confinement.

Born to Run, Root & Play

Searching for food and exploring her surroundings are important behaviours for a sow. Studies of pigs kept under near natural conditions show that they are social and inquisitive animals, renowned for being as intelligent as dogs. Experts estimate that pigs will naturally spend 75% of their time rooting in the soil, foraging and exploring. In the sow stall, these behaviours are impossible.

“In general, sows prefer not to be confined in a small space” and they “find the confinement aversive”.

Scientific Veterinary Committee report, “The Welfare of Intensively Kept Pigs”, 1997

Kind Alternatives - And Practical Too!

About 4 million EU breeding sows - including some in the Republic of Ireland - are already being kept in alternative systems. So, clearly, these are not only more humane, but also practical. Two main types of alternative systems exist for sows: indoor housing in groups, where the animals can move freely but cannot go outside, and outdoor pig keeping, where the sows are kept in roomy paddocks and can behave more naturally.

Outdoor pig keeping can achieve high standards of animal welfare. Sows are allowed to roam on a free-range basis. Shelter is provided by huts or pig arcs. The sows live in groups whilst pregnant, and are then moved to individual huts with their own paddock when the piglets are due. This system is also cheaper to set up. The capital costs are a third of those of indoor housing.

“Since overall welfare appears to be better when sows are not confined throughout gestation [pregnancy], sows should preferably be kept in groups.”

Scientific Veterinary Committee report, “The Welfare of Intensively Kept Pigs”, 1997

Where sows are housed indoors in groups, they are generally given separate areas to lie down, to feed, and a dunging area. To get the highest standards of welfare out of this system, bedding material, such as straw, should be provided. This is used not only for lying on, but also for the sows to root around and explore in. Feeding the sows can be done in a number of ways, ranging from feeders that simply dump food periodically on to the floor, to more sophisticated methods such as electronic sow feeders. These utilise computer technology to ensure that each sow gets a ration tailored to her needs.

It goes without saying that keeping sows in groups requires a different approach to management. Many farmers have already risen to this





Contented sow on straw

challenge. And what's more, productivity - the number of piglets produced per sow per year - has been found to be the same or higher in group housing than in sow stalls.

An abundance of evidence is now available to show that well-designed and well-managed group housing systems not only work, but also work well. They have the potential to achieve high welfare standards.

Give Them Straw

Bedding material of some type is important for the welfare of sows. Straw is the most commonly used material. Others include wood shavings, sawdust and mushroom compost.

Sows naturally spend a large proportion of their time rooting around, chewing and investigating their surroundings. Where sows are housed indoors, straw gives them the material to fulfil these needs. It also provides a more comfortable lying area for the heavy animals, and can also help them cope with temperature fluctuations within the house. If it's cold they'll lie on the straw, if it's not, they may well lie on the bare floor to cool down!

However, some pig farms do not provide straw. Instead, the sows endure an unyielding floor of concrete or slats. An environment that is barren, uncomfortable, and causes increased lameness and foot injuries.

CIWF believes that, wherever possible, straw or other suitable bedding material should be provided.



Young pigs being reared outdoors

Cutting Out Cruelty – An Economic Alternative

Expert studies show that moving out of stalls into group housing adds less than 3 pence in Ireland (less than 2 pence in the UK) to the cost of producing a kilogram of pigmeat. As EU consumers each eat on average 42kg of pigmeat a year, **banning sow stalls would add just over I€1 (just under £1 in the UK) a year to each person's food shopping bill.**

No Need for Fighting in Groups

Defenders of the sow stall system say that it is necessary to cage sows in order to prevent them from being aggressive and attacking each other.

In their report the SVC stressed that group housing systems can be designed and managed so as to prevent aggression. The key factors in this include: eliminating competition at feeding time; keeping the group as stable as possible (e.g. by bringing in new sows only when necessary); providing straw or some other manipulable material; avoiding overcrowding; and feeding bulkier food to prevent hunger. The SVC stressed that "systems such as this, which are working well in common practice, are available".



From sow stalls to farrowing crates - even motherhood is spent behind bars

Farrowing Crate

Most sows kept indoors still spend motherhood behind bars in the farrowing crate. When near to giving birth, the heavily pregnant sow is usually moved from the stall or group house, into the farrowing crate where she will have her piglets; she will stay there until they are weaned. Like the sow stall for pregnant pigs, this farrowing crate is an archaic system that prevents the sow from even turning round. She will remain in this system for about a month at a time.

A range of more humane farrowing systems are already available. CIWF believes that the EU should give the industry a clear message by stating its intention to phase out farrowing crates.

Fattening Pigs

**left:
Overcrowded
fattening
pigs**

So far we have been looking at the plight of the breeding sows - the animals whose role it is to produce piglets. Even those countries whose governments have taken a welcome lead on sow stalls have no room for complacency. Intensive farming methods also cause immense suffering to the pigs reared for their meat. Urgent reforms are needed to the way many of these fattening pigs are reared. Piglets are often separated from their mothers at an early age and reared in conditions that are barren and overcrowded.

On many intensive pig farms, young pigs being fattened for slaughter are forced to spend their lives on bare concrete or slatted floors. There is normally no bedding material.

Bored and frustrated in these barren conditions, the pigs sometimes turn to the only other 'thing' in their world: the tails of other pigs. They begin to bite those tails. Scientific evidence shows that the right way to prevent tail-biting is to keep the pigs in good conditions. What factory farmers do is to slice off part of the tail with pliers or a hot docking iron without the use of anaesthetic.

**Piglet
being
castrated**

In many European countries, castration is also carried out routinely on male piglets. This severely painful mutilation is again performed without anaesthetic. In the Republic of Ireland and the UK, farmers generally no longer carry out this mutilation. However, in some other countries, (Germany for example), the pig industry often insists on it. This is due to fears of 'boar taint', an unpleasant odour that can be found in the meat of sexually mature boars. Castrated when they are usually just a few days old, the piglets' squeals can be almost deafening. Moreover castration is unnecessary - many pigs are slaughtered before the age of sexual maturity, i.e. at an age when boar taint cannot arise.





CIWF's Campaign Objectives:

To achieve an EU-wide phase-out of the sow stall system for keeping pregnant pigs. Breeding sows should instead be kept outdoors, or indoors in groups using loose-housed systems; wherever possible, straw or other suitable bedding material should be provided.

CIWF is also seeking an end throughout the EU to the castration and tail-docking of piglets, to pigs being fattened for slaughter in barren, overcrowded pens, and a planned move away from using the farrowing crate for mothering sows.

In the interests of consumer choice and animal welfare, an EU ban on sow stalls should also be backed by a compulsory labelling scheme, making clear the method by which pork or bacon is produced.

What Can YOU Do?

- Write to: The Minister of Agriculture, Agriculture House, Kildare St., Dublin 2 or, in the UK, to The Minister of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR. Urge him/her to push for an EU-wide ban on sow stalls. Also ask for European action on the other areas of pig welfare concern mentioned above (CIWF's Campaign Objectives).
- If you buy pork or bacon, avoid factory farmed meat.
- Ask your supermarket to stock only pork and bacon from kinder systems rather than caged sows.

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