



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Canadian pig industry: the need for change

In Canada, large industrial operations designed to raise hundreds to thousands of pigs in confinement have largely replaced the small, mixed farms that dominated the landscape before the Second World War. These pig factories typically rely on liquid manure systems and have been widely criticized for their negative impact on the environment, and worker health.

Pig industry animal welfare issues may now be coming to the fore with the December 8th CTV W5 airing of footage shot by a Mercy For Animals undercover investigator who worked for 10 weeks at Interlake Weanlings, a 3,000 sow operation recently purchased by Maple Leaf Foods from the Puratone Corporation, located near Arborg, Manitoba.

I was one of the scientists asked by the animal protection organization Mercy For Animals Canada to review the undercover footage before its release.

The footage revealed numerous welfare issues. Male piglets were routinely castrated in a crude and extremely painful fashion. Their skin was cut into and their abdomens squeezed to expel their testicles, which were then cut off with scissors. No anesthetics or analgesics were used. The failure to use anesthetics is so inherently cruel that castration has been banned in some countries (i.e. U.K, Ireland). The European Union is moving towards a full ban on castration —with or without anesthetics or analgesics—by 2018.

The severe pain caused by the procedure is fully unnecessary. Studies have shown that a mere 3% of intact male pigs (boars) develop tainted meat from hormone release. Alternatives such as vaccinations exist.

The methods used by Interlake Weanlings to kill undesired piglets and compromised sows were also ineffective and cruel. Piglet thumping (smashing a piglet's head on the concrete or against a metal pole) proved unreliable in bringing about sufficient brain damage to kill. Piglets were often left conscious and suffering. The use of a captive bolt pistol that fires a metal bolt into a sow's skull left many sows conscious and suffering, as evidenced by eye blinking after receiving the blow.

The majority of the footage was of pigs confined to filthy, metal gestation crates - 1.2 square meter cages where pregnant pigs are imprisoned until they are moved to another crate (called a "farrowing crate") where they give birth and nurse piglets until forcibly weaned. The video documented animals suffering from painful pressure wounds, eye infections and various other painful conditions such as uterine or rectal prolapses. Some of these health compromised sows were left to suffer for days and actively abused. For example, a lame sow was kicked, slapped, and pulled by her ears to force her to walk to a location where she was then killed.

The video showed how intensive confinement in sow stalls causes chronic psychological distress. These sows exhibited various stereotypical behaviours such as repetitive bar biting. Such a barren, restrictive environment is unacceptable for any animal, particularly animals as intelligent and sensitive as pigs.

there is an alternative.

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These systems of extreme confinement are not restricted to this barn but widely used across Canada. Yet, alternatives exist. For instance, hoop systems where pigs are group-housed on straw, protected from the elements when needed, allowed access to the outdoors and the ability to interact with others, were widely used before the development of large industrial production units. Hoop-barns can easily be adapted, at minimal cost, to house gilts and sows in groups on straw.

Providing straw or some other form of rooting material is a critical requirement in any conversion to group housing. Sows need a substrate that allows them to root, forage and make a nest for their upcoming piglets. Straw relieves frustration and boredom, reducing the risk of aggression.

Straw-based systems are better suited to assist government in achieving its environmental sustainability objectives with regard to the well-established problems with liquid hog manure. Composted manure can more easily and cheaply be transported to crop areas deficient in phosphorus and is a less costly alternative to existing standard liquid manure storages and expensive technologies such as anaerobic digestion manure treatment systems. Properly composted manure kills pathogens and drug-resistant bacteria, stabilizes nutrient retention and renders many harmful chemicals benign. Group housing hoop systems require less concentration of pigs per site, further improving environmental performance.

Straw-based group housing systems are used, or are being implemented, worldwide as gestation crates have been banned in 9 U.S. states, Australia, New Zealand, and the entire European Union. A growing number of grocery chains are requiring their pork suppliers to phase out sow stalls. These systems could easily be implemented throughout Canada.

Many Manitoba sow barns were built between the late 1990s and 2004, during the rapid government-supported expansion of the industry. According to Manitoba

Agriculture swine economic specialists a barn's life-span is 15-20 years. Given the age of existing barns, most of the province's pig producers now need to replace barns, equipment or both.

Consequently, the costs to convert to group housing are costs the industry will necessarily have to absorb in the next decade. These are not new or unexpected costs. Manitoba pig producers are now in a unique and timely position to transition from sow stalls to alternative systems using group housing on straw.

Despite this, the Manitoba Pork Council in its March 2011 booklet *Embracing a Sustainable Future*, has committed only "to encouraging producers to phase out gestation stalls by 2025." Similarly, Ontario Pork recently voted to recommend revising the voluntary pig code of practice to require loose housing for pregnant sows with a similar timeline for voluntarily retrofitting of existing facilities. No provincial government, including Manitoba, has taken steps to end the use of gestation crates.

The undercover footage should heighten growing public concern and action about the use of sow stalls and other routine, inhumane industrial hog production practices. Will Manitoba Pork and other provincial marketing groups now make a real, meaningful commitment towards a phase-out of gestation stalls without government enacting regulations that support ending what is one of the most egregious forms of confinement used in modern agriculture?

Olivier Berreville, PhD in Biology from Dalhousie University. Growing up around farm animals in Europe, he has also acquired field experience documenting the confinement, transportation and slaughter of animals in Canada.

Notes:

Link to the W5 report:
<http://www.ctvnews.ca/w5/undercover-investigation-reveals-disturbing-and-inhumane-treatment-of-factory-farm-animals-1.1070919>

Link to Mercy For Animals Canada's footage:
<http://www.mercyforanimals.ca/pigcruelty/>

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