

January 10, 2013

The Vermont Livestock Care Standards Advisory Council (Council) is pleased to provide feedback to the legislature and to the Secretary of Agriculture, at the request of the House Committee on Agriculture, on the confinement of sows during gestation in a manner that does not allow them to turn around freely, lie down, stand up, or fully extend their limbs (sow gestation crates).

The Council discussed the issues surrounding swine gestation crates at its 2012 April, September and December meetings. During its December meeting, the Council received testimony from three nationally and internationally recognized experts in the fields of swine housing and well-being and two experts familiar with the practical and economic aspects of the Vermont pork industry.ⁱ The Council has taken care when contemplating this issue to consider the pertinent scientific research that has been compiled, the unique characteristics of the Vermont swine industry, and the practical consequences that could result from a ban on this practice in Vermont, some of which might have welfare implications themselves.

Based on the meeting discussions and the expert testimony that was received, the Council would like to make the legislature and the Secretary aware of the following aspects of Vermont's pork industry:

- Vermont operations typically maintain five to fifteen sows, with a statewide range of one to 48 sows, and market their production through a variety of channels.ⁱⁱ There is an increasing amount of direct marketing through farm stands, CSAs, farmers markets and websites, and the niche pork markets in Vermont continue to grow. Vermont pork is primarily produced for niche markets. Those consumers are increasingly demanding that pork be locally grown, pasture raised and antibiotic/hormone free. While Vermont's pork industry is currently able to meet a growing consumer demand for quality, it is limited by inadequate infrastructure to support expanded pork production, including nutritional consultation, equipment availability, expertise in biosecurity and animal health, and feed diversity.
- Gestation crates are a sow housing system that is not currently utilized in Vermont for their intended purpose, but some Vermont swine producers utilize crates for other purposes that positively impact swine welfare. Currently, only one hundredth percent (600/6,000,000) of the U.S. sow population resides in Vermont, and Vermont producers raise fewer pigs than any other New England state (except Rhode Island).ⁱⁱⁱ The size of Vermont's pork industry is limited by available land mass, as well as energy, labor and feed costs which are high compared to the Midwest and southeastern parts of the U.S. Therefore the Vermont landscape and infrastructure makes it unlikely that Vermont will be able to support intensive swine production.

In parts of the country that can sustain large scale swine operations, the industry has evolved to the use of indoor crate housing systems in order to maximize some health, welfare and production benefits, and to minimize some of the disadvantages associated with outdoor/pasture-raised production methods. However, no housing system is perfect or can ensure that every animal contained by it is able to experience the "Five Freedoms" that have become parameters by which to gauge animal well-being in intensive livestock husbandry systems (Freedom from Hunger and Thirst; Freedom from Discomfort; Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease; Freedom to Express Normal Behavior; Freedom from Fear and Distress).^{iv} A system that utilizes gestation crates on a continuous basis for the reproductive life of the sow does not offer sows the freedom to express normal behavior or freedom from discomfort and/or distress. On the other end of the spectrum, pasture-raised sows are not likely to experience freedom from pain, injury or disease, freedom from fear and distress, or freedom from hunger and thirst. In all instances, deliberate husbandry decisions made by attentive producers are necessary to ensure that the positive attributes of the chosen housing system are amplified and the negative aspects are minimized.

The national pork industry is currently responding to consumer concern surrounding swine housing by phasing out gestation crate use to meet an evolving producer awareness and consumer expectation. In general, these phase-out initiatives are encouraged over a multi-year period in order to allow producers to implement alternative housing systems that are perceived as acceptable by the consuming public while still enabling the industry to meet consumer demand in a sustainable manner. Contrary to this market-driven mechanism of effecting change, which impacts all producers desiring a share of this market, the states that have successfully passed a legislative ban on swine gestation crates combined, comprise less than 10% of the total swine production market.^v The former mechanism of effecting change has resulted in a greater true impact on the well-being of U.S. swine and must be supported.

The Council recommends the following:

- That the confinement of sows during gestation is done in a manner that allows them to turn around freely, lie down, stand up, and fully extend their limbs
- That the use of crates for limited restraint of swine for purposes of feeding, breeding, handling, farrowing and disease control be permitted
- The Council does not support an outright ban on gestation crates

ⁱ Dr. Alex Ramirez – Professor, Department of Veterinary Diagnostic and Production Animal Medicine, Iowa State University; Pete Coleman – Founder, Vermont Salumi; Greg Finch – Council member and VT pork producer; Dr. Ed Pajor – Professor of Animal Welfare, University of Calgary, College of Veterinary Medicine, Department of Production Animal Health; Dr. Thomas Parsons - Associate Professor of Swine Production Medicine, Department of Clinical Studies, New Bolton Center

ⁱⁱ Greg Finch, “Perspectives on the Vermont Pork Market and Production”, Paper prepared for the December 2012 meeting of the Livestock Care Standards Advisory Council, December 2012. P.1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Statistics vary depending on source. Additional statistics available in Pork Checkoff’s, “Quick Facts: The Pork Industry at a Glance”, <http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/5bb6aa6d#/5bb6aa6d/84>, taken from Meat Animal Production, Disposition and Income, USDA, NASS, April 2011.

^{iv} Farm Animal Welfare Council, <http://www.fawc.org.uk/freedoms.htm>, taken from the Report of the Technical Committee to Inquire into the Welfare of Animals kept under Intensive Livestock Husbandry Systems, “Brambell Report”, December 1965 (HMSO London, ISBN 0 10 850286 4).

^v Thomas D. Parsons, V.M.D., Ph.D. “The Sow Housing Conundrum”, <www.vermontagriculture.com> (December 6, 2012)