

On Sows, Consumers and Codes

By James Reesor, November 2015

Sow housing has been a major issue for producers in the last few years. Changes to the Pig Code directed towards sow housing are said to be focused on positive changes from both an animal welfare and consumer perspective. The reality however, is that the pending changes come up short on both fronts. In the meanwhile, both the producer and the sow will end up dealing with the fallout.

Starting with the consumers, it is noted that some pork producers invest significant effort seeking higher value, low volume niche markets. That is good for them but let me make a radical comment. My markets include the 95%. Who are the 95%? They are consumers who eat meat. They primarily buy from the major grocery store, restaurant and hotel sectors. They are here in Canada and around the world. I want to align my farm with processors seeking to profitably supply these consumers. Indeed, this ability represents a very large niche market.

What do the 95% want? I claim they want value, high quality pork and confidence the meat is both safe and was raised by producers providing high levels of animal care. Value is very important. The 95% are unsure what good animal care means. About 2% of consumers are trying to define this for them.

Animal care definitions are confusing. For example, the term “animal welfare” has been used, in multiple ways, since the 1970’s. One of the five “freedoms” listed under the “animal welfare” definition is “the freedom to express natural behavior”. This well meaning assumption drives the lobby effort to remove sows from “single sow gestation pens” and push them into group housing, so they can move around. We producers, and our veterinarians, well know “providing the right to express natural behavior”, in group housing, also means providing dominant sows the opportunity to bully and intimidate submissive sows.

Group sow housing systems can be implemented from a “give them what they want” marketing perspective. Ironically, this is forcing sow housing changes with no corresponding improvements, and indeed reductions, in sow care and well being. One measure of animal care is sow mortality.

Curiously, some “animal welfare” proponents claim mortality levels are not relevant considerations when evaluating sow “welfare”.

Our pork production system has a 5 year average sow mortality rate of 3.3%. Industry sow mortality averages over 7% and in many cases exceeds 10%. Forced facility conversions to group sow housing may well see sow mortality increases. I cannot tolerate changing existing sow housing facilities at the risk of lowering our animal care standards.

Our Canadian pork industry risks trying to satisfy all possible markets and lobby groups without focusing on what matters to 95% of our customers – value, meat quality, food safety and animal care. Recent sow housing changes to the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Pigs represents “give them what they want” marketing, targeting the 2%. We risk lowering animal care standards while also making our industry less competitive. This, I cannot understand.

Our farm wants to efficiently and professionally produce pork at the highest standards of quality, food safety and animal care. We want to market to the 95%. This, I can understand.

With regard to the Code, the National Pig Code Committee says is based on science, consensus and common sense. The Committee asserts that there was world-wide examination of the latest research and views on sow housing. Indeed, the National Committee did make the draft Codes available for on-line, world-wide comment. It can only be assumed that those with a most aggressive and anti-conventional housing viewpoint would have bothered to comment. Of note, in the Canadian consultation period, the insights and recommendations of Canadian swine producers, swine veterinarians and Provincial Pork Producer Associations was largely ignored by the Committee. The final Codes, as related to sow housing, changed very little from the initial draft Codes. These Codes, as they relate to sow housing, seek to end most stall housing for gestating animals.

Pig Code Committee claims to represent a broad range of industry and other “stakeholder” representatives. Apparently there was unanimous support among this group for the final published Codes. With that noted there appears to be some confusion. At least one committee member states that all barns must be converted by 2024. This however, is not verified by the published Codes, which provides for the maintenance of existing sow barns

provided “sows are given the opportunity to exercise periodically...” It might be noted those marketing loose sow housing equipment may well seek a rigid enforcement of these Codes.

The real unfortunate animal in these discussions are the sows in our Canadian barns. Forcing conversions of facilities built to safely house and care for sows will too often result in animal care situations that leave our sows worse off. We who work closely with sows, who were largely ignored in the Code development, know only too well that providing the right to “express natural behavior” exposes submissive sows too often to bullying and aggression, as noted above. If rigidly enforced, these Codes will not improve the care and well-being of the Canadian sow herd. That, however, may not be their purpose. These Codes may well have been primarily designed to respond to the interests of various media and lobby group interests.

We should all remember when these various interests move on to their next agenda, we producers will still be the ones left caring for our animals.