

Educate Yourself!

Sow Gestation Housing Options

Few issues in the animal industry cause as much controversy as how we house gestating sows. In a society that is several generations removed from agriculture and that treats pets as a family member, it is difficult to comprehend why many gestating sows are housed in individual gestation stalls. Without proper experience and education, this understandably seems like a questionable practice employed on many swine farms. So here is the opportunity to become educated on sow housing options!

We have to realize that there are many different types of gestation sow housing but they can be generally classified as either individual housing or group housing. There are no “perfect” solutions to sow gestation housing, which is why we see so many different options. Regardless of housing type implemented on any particular farm, the American Association of Swine Veterinarians (AASV) supports the use of sow housing configurations that:

- Provide every animal with access to appropriate food and water;
- Protect sows and piglets from detrimental effects associated with environmental extremes, particularly temperature extremes;
- Reduce exposure to hazards that result in disease, pain or injury to sows or piglets;
- Allow sows and piglets to express appropriate behaviors and minimize inappropriate behaviors within the constraints of the housing type;
- Minimize aggression and competition between sows;
- Promote good air quality and allow proper sanitation; and
- Facilitate evaluation and care of individual animals while protecting worker safety

Different types of housing options provide different benefits and may focus on different points of this AASV position statement. To fully understand what is best for the animal, we must also understand some typical behaviors of sows. When mixed in a group of unfamiliar animals, sows will fight to determine a dominance hierarchy. This fighting can be extremely severe and will occasionally result in death of an animal if not removed from the pen. Think about bringing together a large group of unfamiliar dogs and let them have it out with no leashes or restraint! Once the dominant animals in a group are established, they will push the submissive animals out of the way when eating. Sows are social creatures and will typically lie up against one another in a group but the submissive sows will seek to get away from the dominant animals.

Let me first discuss individual stalls, which is one of the most common housing systems found on American farms and at the center of the housing controversy. Stalls are widely used to provide individual care to the sow. It is easy to adjust feed levels based on body condition without the competition from other sows. It is also much easier to spot the sows that are not eating and need additional attention or treatment. Individual stalls protect the sows from injuries incurred from fighting or riding of other sows. The biggest detriment and the heart of the controversy of individual stalls is that animals are restricted in movement, not having enough room to turn around.

Many different group housing options have been implemented on various farms. There are traditional pens – either in small groups or large groups. We see small pens of 5-6 sows up to large pens of over 100 sows. Some of the small pens will incorporate feeding partitions to help minimize fighting at feeding time, although it does not totally eliminate the feed stealing by a dominant sow. With pen systems, individual sow attention is much more difficult – we cannot determine sows that are off-feed easily nor adjust individual feeding amounts. There is also more fighting and injuries. With a pen system, management becomes even more important, as thin or injured sows must be pulled out to an individual pen to receive individual care and attention. However, pens do allow sows to move around freely and exercise more.

There have been some farms implement other types of pen housing systems. Electronic Sow feeding (ESF) systems are used with large groups of sows. Each animal has an electronic RFID tag that is read when she enters a computerized individual feeding stall. This allows farm personnel to set individual feed levels for each sow, removing the feed competition issue from pen housing. However, there are training factors to consider and working with potential technology problems. This system also does not eliminate all of the fighting and injury issues. Another option adapted at fewer farms is free access stalls, in which the sows can enter an individual gestation stall and close the gate behind her so that no other sows can enter. However, she can also choose to back out of the stall and be in a general loafing area. Sows are fed in the stalls, but feed levels cannot be individually adjusted since a sow can enter any stall. These systems are much newer and more costly and have not been adapted on a lot of sow farms yet.

As I hope you understand, the sow housing controversy is not as simple as just putting all sows in a pen so that they have space to turn around. Each of the different housing systems requires different types of management to make them operate successfully and there are pros and cons of each system. It is difficult for those not integrally involved in the daily operations of a sow farm to make this decision for farmers. I hope that you have educated yourself a bit through this article, but please reach out to a swine veterinary colleague to educate yourself even more – we love to share about our industry with our colleagues!