

Pork Prose

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Nothing is more depressing than an empty farrowing crate. It's a signal that profit potential down the road will suffer. And it's a grim reminder that feed was wasted on a non-productive sow.

One factor leading to the empty farrowing crate syndrome is the failure of sows to return to heat. This is usually figured to be a fist-letter-gilt problem, but it will occur in older sows, too.

Why does it happen? Researchers at the University of Nebraska have been asking the same question. And after several experiments, it looks like they have some answers.

In designing the experiments,

they suspected that low energy intake during lactation was at the root of the problem. So they fed nursing sows several different energy levels, then took a lot of measurements in both the sows and their pigs.

The first series of experiments was set up to look at the sow. D. Reese and E.R. Peo, Jr. placed the sows on low, medium or high energy levels during lactation. These levels corresponded to a daily intake of six, nine or 12 pounds of a normal corn-soybean meal lactation diet. After weaning, they fed the sows four pounds per day.

As expected, sows getting only

six pounds a day lost a lot of weight during lactation — almost 52 pounds. Those eating 12 pounds per day lost only four pounds. Those on the low energy level lost .3 inches of backfat compared to only a .1 inch loss in the high energy group.

By seven days post weaning, 97 percent of the sows on the high energy diet had come into heat. And 91 percent of those on the medium energy level (nine pounds per day) were in heat within the first week. But sows restricted to six pounds were slow. After seven days, only 60 percent had shown signs of estrus. And even after 70 days, 14 percent of these sows still weren't in heat.

What was different about the sows that came into heat and those that didn't? Reese and Peo decided to take a closer look at the low energy group to find out. They discovered two things. First, sows in the non-return group had less backfat at weaning. And second, blood analysis indicated that the non-cycling sows had overactive thyroid glands. The trouble is, we don't know if these sows were hyper at the start, or if the restricted feeding made them hyper. That's a brand new can of worms for future research.

What about the baby pig? In the second series of experiments, two other Nebraska scientists, J.L. Neissen and A.J. Lewis, fed three different energy levels to sows to

get a handle on the relationship of calorie intake and sow and litter performance. These levels corresponded to a feed intake of seven, 8.5 or 10 pounds of a corn-soybean diet. Pigs received no creep feed.

Baby pigs in all groups had similar survival rates — about 93 percent. But feeding sows either 8.5 or 10 pounds each day during lactation produced heavier pigs at 28 days then feeding 7 pounds. For example, feeding 8.5 pounds produced a litter weight of 135.6 pounds compared to 127.4 pounds with the 7-pound feeding level. So the extra 42 pounds of sow feed produced more than 8 pounds of additional litter weight. That's \$4.20 invested in sow feed and at least \$7 returned in extra production. Money well spent.

So there's a real plus to feeding 8.5 pounds rather than 7 pounds per day during lactation. But in this study, sow and litter performance in the 10-pound group was almost identical to that of sows getting 8.5 pounds.

Where does that leave you? To be sure that sows come into heat quickly, they ought to be getting 12 pounds of feed a day (16,000 kcal) during lactation. But these studies suggest that milk production (at least in first-litter sows) may plateau at a daily feeding level of around 8.5 pounds.

So, full feeding may be more than is necessary. But if you restrict the feed too much for a nursing sow, sooner or later it'll cost you — either in milk production or in return to heat.

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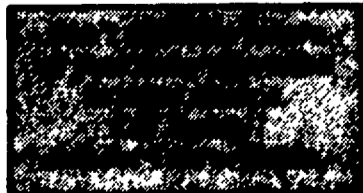
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