

Sow's "body language" tells when she will farrow

COLLEGE PARK, MD - Forget the pig latin. When a sow is about to give birth, she uses body language to tell her farmer.

It's all a matter of interpretation, says a researcher for The University of Maryland Agricultural Experiment Station (UMAES). A sow may start "body talking" up to 24 hours before it is time for delivery. Knowing what the sow is "trying to say" gives farmers a hint about how soon piglets will arrive.

"The behaviors are relatively consistent and pretty predictive of when the farmer can expect the pigs to arrive," says Dr. Thomas G. Hartsock, associate professor of animal science at the University of Maryland.

If producers can find an easy way to monitor a sow's activity, it is possible to predict when the sow will farrow, or give birth, Hartsock says.

For years producers have used breeding dates and length of pregnancy to determine farrowing dates. If farmers know how a sow acts at different stages of labor, they are better able to predict what time the piglets will be born and they can be available to deal with complications brought on by the birth.

Hartsock's research showed that

sows become more active during the 24 hours before they farrow. Approximately 60% of the test sows had their pigs within six hours of a period of "intense activity," he says. Intense activity meant the animal stood up and laid down more than once a minute.

An active sow is as restless as a nervous child, Hartsock says. She gets up and lies down, nests, urinates and defecates. Some of this activity is part of what he calls the nesting instinct, when sows prepare for the new litter.

Sows left outdoors in large pens collect sticks and weeds to make a bed for newborn pigs, he says. In a confined farrowing pen, they use whatever bedding material they can find to do the same.

Hartsock says he observed test sows scratching and trying to nest all during the 24-hour period prior to farrowing. But when test sows started rooting and pawing the floor of their pens, it indicated they were about to farrow. Even the position of a sow's legs when she is lying down gives some clue to when she will farrow, he says.

Hartsock now plans to find an efficient way to monitor this activity. Someday, he says, farmers will be able to walk into their barns and know how soon each sow will farrow based on a record of their movements.

USDA reviews standards on greenhouse cucumbers

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Department of Agriculture is seeking comments on its proposal to revise the voluntary U.S. standards for grades of greenhouse cucumbers.

John J. Gardner, a marketing official with USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, said the proposed revisions were developed by USDA at the request of the American Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association. The requested changes include a longer

minimum length and changes in definitions of certain defects.

Gardner said the proposed changes would bring the standards for grades in line with current cultivation and marketing practices for greenhouse cucumbers.

USDA establishes grade standards and official grading for many agricultural products. Use of the standards and the grading service is voluntary and is paid for by users.

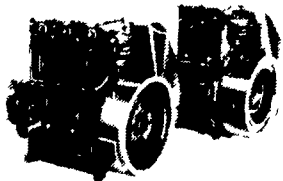
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