Pork Prose

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ALL-IN, ALL-OUT

Fifteen years ago, an all-in, all-out farrowing house was a universally accepted creature in the hog business. The added cost of making separate rooms was more than offset by a reduction in respiratory and diarrhea diseases. Soon to follow was the concept of all-in, all-out nurseries.

Now there is a lot of momentum to handling pigs from birth to market as a single group, which means the grow-finish stage would also be managed in an all-in, all-out fashion.

The advantages may seem pretty obvious, and so may the drawbacks. What isn't so clear is how to estimate a pay-back, especially for the small producer.

Change your facilities to all-in, all-out? It depends on your current level of performance, says a veterinarian. It depends on the costs of remodeling says, an engineer. It depends on how long you're committed to the hog business, says a producer.

Let's take a brief look at the issue, and in the end you'll hopefully be a little better equipped to figure whether your farm is suited for continuous flow or groups.

The Advantages

When you're able to break the disease cycle and reduce the transmission of bacteria and viruses from older pigs to younger pigs, a lot of nice things happen.

E. coli has trouble getting a foothold. Pasteurella can't survive. Even parasites have a hard time hanging on. Emptying a room, followed by washing and disinfecting, will do all of these things. The resultant increase in performance and reduction in death loss is the major incentive for handling hogs as a group.

There are some other, more subtle advantages to all-in, all-out. Facility cleanup, especially in the farrowing house and nursery, is easier since you don't have to worry about chilling other pigs in the room. Buildings are cleaned more often, making for a pleasant work environment. And since the entire farm revolves around a schedule, the chores are more apt to get done on time.

The Drawbacks

Facilities. If increased performance and disease control are the chief incentives for all-in, all-out, then the major obstacle has to be the cost of facilities.

Dividing a room means new walls and doors, tight enough to restrict air flow from one group of pigs to another. It also means separate ventilation systems. Each room will require at least two fans and a new inlet.

Ideally, manure gutters should be separate, although the engineers tell us that as long as pigs don't come in direct contact with manure from another group of pigs, we can get by. *Labor.* Someone has to clean all those pens. Currently a lot of producers pressure wash and disinfect their finishing facilities only once every few years. Many others never clean them at all.

In an all-in, all-out system, the grower-finisher barn will need to be cleaned at least 3 times a year.

Management. It's no cinch maintaining a group system. If, for example, you're set up to farrow 10 sows every two weeks, you'll hopefully be breeding 12-14 sows one week out of every two.

Breeding too many sows will cause you grief, and not enough sows will cost you money. If you have a sow come in heat in the "off-week" and you decide to breed her anyway, then she'll farrow in a "group" all by herself.

This problem presents a real dilemma for the moderate-sized producer who is trying to batch-farrow his sows. A good number of sows will come into heat when they're not supposed to. Do you sell them, or hope they'll be in "sync" with the next group? Either way, it's going to cost you some money.

Traffic Patterns. Pig traffic and people traffic should be one-way as much as possible. For example, sows leaving the farrowing house should be able to walk (or ride) to the breeding barn without going through any farrowing, nursery or finishing rooms. Growing pig movement should be in a constant direction of youngest to oldest until they reach market weight.

Ideally, people working in the facility should walk from the rooms holding the youngest pigs to those housing the oldest pigs. Foot baths should separate each division. If this traffic routine isn't practical, do the best you can, realizing pigs will spread disease more readily than people.

The Economics

Farrowing. I wasn't able to find any controlled studies comparing group farrowing with a continuous system. But I would speculate that sows in an all-in, all-out farrowing house would produce at least .10 to .25 more pigs per litter than a similar group in a continuous flow facility.

The profit associated with an extra pig per litter is an incredible $35 to $50, since each extra pig goes to market for little more than the cost of feed. If we accept the .25 pig per litter advantage, the returns would be $8.75 to $12.50 per litter.

Nursery. Preliminary data from Michigan State University shows that in a 35-day time period, pigs handled all-in, all-out gain 15 percent faster and 6 percent more efficiently than pigs in a continuous-flow nursery.

Under their conditions, this figure out to four extra pounds of pig for only an extra four pounds of feed. If you sold the pig when he left the nursery, the economic advantage would be at least $2.00, maybe $3.00. But in a farrow-to-finish operation, the heavier pigs leaving the nursery would have to pay their dividends in the grower-finisher phase, which is much harder to calculate.

Finishing. Purdue seems to have the most objective information, with all-in, all-out hogs showing a 10- or 11-day reduction in time to market as well as a reduction in

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