Pork Prose

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MULTIPLE SITE PRODUCTION

Most producers by now have heard of multiple site production, often referred to as medicated early weaning (MEW). The system involves weaning pigs at a fairly early age into an off-site nursery, followed by a finishing period which occurs at yet another site.

While it seems to be catching on in large operations as a tool to reduce disease cycles, there are some obvious limitations for moderate-sized and smaller operations.

Purpose Of MEW

Many of the disease problems that pigs encounter are spread from the sow to the pig in the farrowing house. In some cases, especially respiratory disease, the problem is then magnified in the nursery.

Using some "old" concepts of immunity, the MEW system helps to break the normal cycle of disease spread from the sow to the pig. Prior to farrowing, sows in this system are vaccinated for a number of diseases. This improves the immune status of the sow and increases antibodies in the milk against these diseases.

The immune protection is passed to the baby pigs through the colostrum. During the weeks that follow, when passive immunity is at its highest level, pathogenic organisms seldom get a foothold in these young pigs.

While pigs are in this window of protection, they're weaned from the sow and moved to another location. And, we hope, two benefits will result. First, the spread of disease from the sow to the pig (vertical transmission) will be minimized. Second, since the nursery is isolated from the farm of origin, transmission of disease from the home farm is also blocked (horizontal transmission).

Benefits

Producers have observed a reduction in days to market of at least 5-7 days, and in some cases more than 30 days.

A recent newsletter published by Central Soya Research reported increases of more than 30 pounds in weight gain during the nursery phase as a result of medicated early weaning practices.

Producers have also seen decreases in mortality, "poor-doing" pigs, as well as improvements in feed efficiency.

Factors To Consider

Weaning age. The appropriate age may depend, in part, on the nature of the disease. But most producers wean in the range of 10-21 days.

Sow productivity. Litter size and conception rate may suffer as sows are weaned under three weeks. A potential loss of one pig born live must be weighed against the expected benefits. So even though sows can potentially be bred back sooner, their annual productivity may remain unchanged or even drop after switching to MEW. Some producers using the MEW system delay breeding for one heat cycle to provide time for the sow to recover.

Sow parity. Dr. Nate Winkleman, a veterinarian from Morris, Minn., recommends the use of older parity sows for MEW systems. Pigs originating from gilt litters are often lighter and exhibit higher mortality rates at weaning than those from second or later-parity sows. It's also generally accepted that the concentration of colostral antibodies are higher in older parity sows.

Vaccination and medication. The types of vaccines and medications should be selected in consultation with a knowledgeable veterinarian. Being too conservative with the number of products used may reduce the effectiveness of the program, whereas going "overboard" with vaccines and drugs may needlessly add to the cost.

Isolated unit. How far is it to the unit? Who will manage the unit? Will numbers of pigs in the nursery unit be enough to justify a full-time the manager, who can then avoid contact with home farm? These are critical questions for which there may be no answers for some producers when they seriously consider MEW. A minimum separation between farms appears to be two miles.

Sow herd size. Some experts suggest that 2,000 sows at the home farm would be the ideal size for "driving" the isolated nursery. Obviously, most farms are much smaller than this, which leads some producers to combine pigs from several breeding sites. Attempting to run an MEW system with a small herd may increase overhead costs so much that they outweigh the benefits.

Sanitation. Unless all-in-all-out can be part of the program, MEW shouldn't even be considered.

Diet and facilities. No weak spots can be tolerated in either the feed or the facilities. Use a highly digestible feed and keep the groups small. Weaning pigs at ages of less than 10 days almost certainly will require the need for liquid diets. Even pigs at two weeks of age will not perform well unless the diet contains a high percentage of milk products, and probably dried porcine plasma as well.

Summary

MEW early weaning shows potential for eliminating disease, or at least reducing the harmful effects of a disease. For producers that have an isolated nursery, and perhaps an isolated finisher, this concept may be worth considering. Otherwise, producers may have to pool their production to make MEW practical.

While considering the alternatives, it may be wise to see how MEW shakes out in the next year or two.

References

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