



Pork Prose

by
Kenneth B. Kephart

Penn State Extension Swine Specialist

STAYING COMPETITIVE

How will you stay in business for the next year or the next decade? What follows are few facts and opinions.

Small Operations (<100 Sows)

Because no two operations are

alike, every producer has a different perspective.

Take the small operation. Often, labor is provided by the family with no out-of-pocket cost. Facilities are usually remodeled from existing buildings, which helps to reduce overhead.

Environmental problems are uncommon since operations of this size don't generate much odor.

Diversification is the rule, with several farm enterprises contributing income.

Finally, because of the low initial cost, most owners need not make a long-term commitment.

Those factors are all advantages. But because the operation is small, total income is also limited, often to the point that it cannot support a family. Pig flow is continuous, which presents more disease problems than all-in/all-out. And with the small numbers to sell, there is little market leverage.

Can such an operation compete in today's industry? Absolutely, if the producer has a market. That's an important "if," and one that seems to be quickly changing, especially for feeder pigs.

Moderate-Sized Operations (100-500 Sows)

As the operation grows in size,

some nice things happen. Production often follows a weekly schedule, making farrowing groups and all-in/all-out practical at least through the nursery stage.

More market options are available simply because there are more pigs. And often the operation will support several families.

But now the labor extends beyond the owner or immediate family. Without question, finding and keeping qualified people to work on hog farms is a big issue.

The operation is big enough to generate nuisance and environmental problems, even if manure is handled in a sound manner. Buildings are all of the sudden expensive—much more so than remodeled facilities, and on a per-sow basis, even more expensive than very large operations.

Many farmers in this category often have a major crop operation, adding to an already heavy responsibility with the hogs. And of course, the big facility investment translates to a long-term commitment to the hog business.

Large Operations (> 500 Sows)

As hog facilities get bigger, the cost per sow comes down. Labor is more efficient. Now, instead of one person caring for 100 sows, that person can handle 200 or more.

Pigs leave the barn by the truckload, allowing for all of the market flexibility permitted in a several hundred-mile radius. All-in/all-out is standard from farrowing through finishing. And the people on the farm devote all of their time and energy to raising pigs—specialization that pays dividends.

Disadvantages include the fact that labor is almost all hired. Somehow, somehow, the owner must challenge that hired labor to be as conscientious as he would. Also, large operations frequently generate odor complaints.

With these sizes of enterprises in perspective, staying competitive and staying in business, it seems to me, comes down to three factors: image, marketing, and the day-to-day routines.

Image

Manure is the major image issue. Nutrient management is now for real. We're all beginning to appreciate it. But we're also realizing it's easier on paper than it is in practice.

Odor generates lots of problems with few solutions. We need objective ways to measure odor, and we desperately need methods of control.

Until we've learned how to control odor, remember that perceived odor problems are always worse when farm appearance and operator cooperation falls short.

A final comment that may sound a bit sobering is that Pennsylvania is not a particularly good place to raise hogs. In addition to paying a lot for corn, and not having the marketing advantage we had 20 years ago, we also have a lot of people encroaching on our farms in the southeast part of the state.

Marketing

First, are you providing the market with what it wants—the right weight range and desirable amounts of fat and muscling? If not, remember that the market not only determines how much you make on each hog. The market also determines if you make anything on each hog.

Once we get past the fat and muscle measurements, there is more to worry about.

Pale, soft, and exudative (PSE)

pork is a bubbling issue ready to boil. Most packers will tell you that PSE is already a big-time problem. Now, we're poised to use (manage?) the stress gene to improve carcass measurements, perhaps at the expense of carcass quality since the stress gene is clearly related to PSE.

Drug residues should not be a problem but they are—at least enough that consumers think they are. Well, the National Pork Producers Council has a Pork Quality Assurance program, in which producers have no excuses for not participating. Producers must understand their herd health program, the use of drugs, and have a good relationship with their veterinarian or a professional familiar with the operation.

With that accomplished, the producer can qualify for the highest level of certification (Level III). In Pennsylvania, out of several thousand producers, we have only about 100 on Level III.

The viability of your market is perhaps something to lose sleep over. Where would you be, for example, if you lost the local buying station, the local sale barn, or your major buyer? If you happen to be in an area where there are several marketing alternatives, consider yourself lucky.

Day-To-Day — The Big Items

- Sow productivity. Unlike feed costs or market hog prices, sow productivity is the one thing over which you have some control that also exerts a huge impact on profit. In a 250-sow operation, increasing production by 1 pig per sow per year will add at least \$10,000 in profit.

- All-in/all-out. It's important for pigs from birth to market weight. Less disease, less feed, and less time to market.

- Artificial insemination. A piece of technology that's been around for at least 20 years and is finally getting a grip on our industry. It provides an opportunity to use quality, proven breeding stock, and can do wonders for uniformity.

- Multiple site production. This is all-in/all-out and then some. Farrowing at one location. Weaning (at an early age before diseases are transmitted from sow to pig) into a nursery at another location. And finishing at yet a third location. The improvement in performance, especially in a herd with respiratory problems, is impressive.

- Keeping the place full. Using our 250-sow farrow-to-finish herd as an example, farrowing nine litters per week, instead of 10 litters per week, will reduce profit at least \$6,000/year. So operating even at 90 percent of capacity is bad news.

Day-To-Day — The Small Items

- Don't waste time. Have a system and keep things on a schedule. Try to finish on job before you start another. Don't create work for yourself in the most common tasks that often waste time—moving hogs, pressure washing, farming several farms, and hauling manure.

- Feed waste. We all know it's expensive. It has much to do with feeder adjustment and a lot to do with feeder design.

- Mange/parasites. Not much excuse any more for putting up with either of these problems. Even Ivomec is now available in feed-grade form for growing pigs.

- Keeping pigs comfortable. Cold pigs are expensive pigs.

- Don't wean too early. Many times the solution to post-weaning

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Pa.-Bred Bull Enters Proving Program

PLAIN CITY, Ohio—7H4749 Plushanski Thor ERIC-ET, a young sire bred by Charles Plushanski of Kutztown, Pa., has been chosen to tenter Select Sires' Program for Genetic Advancement (PGA) sire sampling system.

Based on his outstanding pedigree, 7H4749 has been selected as one of 200 Holstein bulls from throughout the United States to enter the program in 1994. In ad-

dition to being sampled through PGA Cooperator herds, this young sire has been selected as a super sampler. With this designation, he is available to all interested Holstein breeders.

7H4749 ERIC is a Thor son that should sire tall, correct daughters with great mammary systems. His dam is a Very Good (87) Bell Rex daughter with an "Excellent" mammary system. She has out-

standing PTA's of +2,334M, +103F and +87P and produced 32,099M, 1,422F and 1,093P as a Junior two-year-old. The next dam is Plushanski Neil Flute, who is scored Very Good (87-GMD-DOM) and is well known as a transmitter of high solids milk. She has a top record of 35,145M, 1,828F and 1,193P as a five-year-old and has produced 102,372M lifetime.

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