



Target

Farm

Action

A monthly digest of practical advice for pig farmers from BPEX

To dry or not to dry that is the question

The gilt is the foundation of a productive herd and there are many management factors to consider, many of these will be covered in a future Action for Productivity sheet from BPEX.

In the mean time one factor that has come under the spotlight in pig groups is the need to use the gilts' udder in the first lactation.

With increasing numbers of units restocking and batch serving gilts, units may find a large proportion of gilts in any one farrowing period.

If gilts have poor numbers born alive though, is it best to dry them off than give them a poor lactation first time around?

There is evidence to suggest that suckling in the first lactation makes teats more productive in the next lactation, this suggests that suckling a big litter would be beneficial.

Equally it would make more efficient use of feed and housing if all gilts (and sows) had full litters.

So if you decided that gilts should be left with 10 piglets, and that meant one or two having their piglets fostered away soon after

farrowing and dried off, can it cause problems? The dried off gilts are likely to come back on heat unevenly, and re-serving them again soon after farrowing will increase the risk of poor litters next time around; re-serving before 21 days (and particularly at under 14 days) can lead to reductions in both conception rate and litter size (~0.1 piglets per day earlier).

One way to manage this and keep a batch pattern might be to control the next cycle using a synchronisation product.

The best scenario would be to foster up to 10 (always remembering the fostering golden rules regarding piglet size and age), but



not to re-serve the dried off gilts less than 14 days post farrowing.

By doing this the gilts you have chosen to have full litters get a good lactation first time around and the dried off gilts are at less of a risk of having problems after being re-served.

This policy should only be used for times of fluctuating numbers born alive, and not as routine, as units experiencing "not enough piglets to go around" should quickly review serving and

gestation management to resolve the issue. For the odd batch though it is good to have a fallback plan to reduce the negative impact on the all important gilt.

Optimising returns from the finished pig

Whatever the market conditions, knowing how your pigs are performing during the rearing and finishing stages will ensure that you have the information to act and optimise your income.

Key parameters to monitor are daily liveweight gain, feed conversion ratio and post-weaning mortality.

Pigs grow at different rates, depending on their age and weight. Subdividing is useful as without it excellent finisher stage performance can mask poor rearer growth rates (and vice versa), resulting in a lost opportunity for strategically targeting specific areas.

If you don't routinely weigh pigs through the system, then using 'weight watcher' pens can help you gather useful information.

Once you know how your pigs are performing, you and your team can set achievable targets and then monitor and compare with industry benchmarks.

Feed conversion ratio tells us how many kilograms of feed are being used to achieve each kilogramme of liveweight gain.

As with DLWG, FCR varies with pig weight. Smaller pigs typically have a better (ie lower) FCR than heavier pigs.

For example the average FCR for the rearer stage (7 - 35 kg) is 1.7, while for the finisher stage (35 - 100 kg) 2.8 is more typical; so compare like with like. A high (poor) FCR highlights that a lot of feed is being used to produce each kilogramme of live pig, it can result from:

- Physical loss of feed before it even reaches the pig (eg wastage via slats, birds, vermin, discarded mouldy feed)
- Pigs being fed a diet that is not suitable for their needs
- Pigs not using suitable feed efficiently because of poor environment, health, etc
- Pig deaths as feed eaten prior to their deaths will have been included in the FCR

To improve FCR you need to determine which of the above is having the largest negative impact on FCR and/or which can most



readily and cheaply be corrected. When recording deaths it is useful to record their approximate age and weight.

It is not only demoralising to lose pigs at this stage, it is also expensive as you have already incurred breeding and feeding herd costs to get the pig to this weight.

Mortality is often associated with disease; work with your veterinary surgeon to tackle any disease, whilst ensuring that stock management and the facilities provided do not exacerbate any underlying disease conditions.

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