

Pork Industry Moves To Group Pens At Great Cost

BY STEVE KARNOWSKI
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — As pork producers build new barns and retrofit old ones to give hogs more space, they say consumers opposed to keeping pregnant sows in tight cages can expect to pay for their clearer consciences with higher food prices.

Under pressure from animal rights activists and sensing a shift in consumer sentiment, several major pork producers have agreed to phase out gestation crates and switch to more open pens. Major pork buyer McDonald's Corp. recently announced its suppliers will have to stop using them as well.

"The McDonald's announcement was a tipping point in the debate about gestation stalls versus pens. ... That announcement has fundamentally changed the way people are looking at this debate," said Dennis Treacy, executive vice president and chief sustainability officer for Smithfield Foods Inc., the world's largest pork producer.

But the move to group pens requires building new barns and renovating old ones, more labor and more training for workers. Veterinary costs can go up because sows tend to fight and sometimes injure each other. Experts say at least some of those expenses are likely to be passed on in the price of ham, bacon, chops and sausage.

"We may as a society be in the process of deciding we're more than willing to pay those costs, but people ought to know what's involved in their decisions," said Blake Hurst, president of the Missouri Farm Bureau and a former hog farmer.

Smithfield had converted 30 percent of its company-owned farms by the end of December and is on track to meet its goal of switching all of them by 2017, Treacy said. A global food company with about \$13 billion in annual sales, Smithfield expects the cost of switching to open pens to reach \$300 million. Treacy said it's too early to tell how much of that would be passed along to consumers or absorbed by the company.

Putting open pens into existing barns cuts production because the buildings can't hold as many sows, said Dave Warner, spokesman for the National Pork Producers Council. But building bigger barns to accommodate group pens is expensive, and smaller producers who can't afford to retrofit existing barns could be forced out of business, further reducing supplies, he said.

Gestation crates typically measure about 2



PHOTO: METRO GRAPHICS

feet by 7 feet, giving a sow that might weigh 400 to 600 pounds a space that's too narrow to turn around or even sleep on its side.

While animal welfare groups insist the stalls are cruel, the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Swine Veterinarians say science does not provide a clear-cut answer, and that there are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches.

One major reason producers switched to gestation crates is that sows in group pens tend to fight, leading to injuries and submissive sows losing out on food to more dominant animals.

Feeding systems exist that reduce competition for food by letting sows eat separately, and some pen designs let them take refuge from other hogs while still providing more freedom of movement. But it takes more work to monitor the animals for injuries, other health problems and whether they're getting enough food. And farm workers who enter group pens with sows that weigh several hundred pounds apiece have a higher risk of injury, making better training is essential.

Farm labor is expensive, and high-quality labor is even more expensive, said Brian Buhr, head of the applied economics department at the University of Minnesota. Even top quality operations making the switch experience steep

learning curves, and what may seem like small cost increases per animal can add up to big expenses, he said.

Some pork producers are proud they've never used gestation crates. They include Paul Willis, who founded the pork operations of Niman Ranch Inc., which supplies restaurants and supermarkets with humanely raised pork. One major customer is Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc., which drew national attention with an animated commercial about its commitment to humane farming that aired during the Feb. 12 Grammy Awards and featured singer Willie Nelson.

To be sure, Niman products usually cost more than mass-produced pork. A recent check at one Minneapolis-area supermarket found Niman pork chops and ham selling for \$9.99 per pound, compared with \$5.89 for regular pork chops and \$6.29 for Hormel ham.

But Willis, who farms in Thornton, Iowa, said customers are willing to pay premium prices for the pork he and more than 500 other farmers raise according to Niman's standards.

"We think our system may be the best and most efficient in the long run for the animals, for the people, for the farmers and the environment," he said. "... Sometimes there's more to farming than just how much money you make."

'Farmageddon' Documentary To Be Shown At Dakota Theatre

The Yankton Weston A. Price Foundation Chapter will be showing the documentary film "Farmageddon: The Unseen War On American Family Farms," at 7 p.m. Tuesday, March 27, at the Dakota Theatre, located at 328 Walnut Street in downtown Yankton.

First-time filmmaker, Kristin Canty's quest to find healthy food for her four children turned into an educational journey to discover why access to these foods were being threatened.

Canty is a Massachusetts mom whose 4-year-old son was healed of multiple allergies by adding farm fresh (raw) milk to his diet. She grew increasingly alarmed at the state and federal government's armed raids of farm buying clubs and health food coops around the nation. In particular, the targeting of the very food that restored her son to perfect health, roused this mother of four children, to document on film the harsh actions against family farms.

What she found were policies that favor agribusiness and factory farms over small family-operated farms selling fresh foods to their communities. Instead of fo-

cusing on the source of food safety problems — most often the industrial food chain — policy-makers and regulators implement and enforce solutions that target and often drive out of business small farms that have proven themselves more than capable of producing safe, healthy food, but buckle under the crushing weight of government regulations and excessive enforcement actions.

"Farmageddon" tells the stories, in the words of the victims themselves, of the numerous trespasses of the health bureaucrats on farmers and consumers civil liberties. Canty also interviews experts on health and nutrition and leading local foods advocates to give a sobering assessment of the plight of farmers who seek to meet the growing demand for healthy, ecologically grown food.

The Weston A. Price Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing information about restoring nutrient-dense foods to the American diet. A healthy diet which includes locally grown produce and pastured dairy and meat can improve your overall well being.

For additional information visit the Farmageddon website: <http://farmageddonmovie.com>

OSHA 10-Hour Safety And Health Course For The Ethanol Industry

BROOKINGS — The office of Engineering Extension at South Dakota State University will hold its annual Occupational Safety and Health Administration voluntary compliance safety and health 10-hour General Industry training course March 28-29 at the Days Inn on East 6th Street in Brookings. The course is designed to address current safety and health hazards for employers and employees working in the ethanol industry.

"Employers can receive significant cost reductions with fewer lost-time accidents and lower insurance rates through the development and implementation of a strong safety culture in their work environment," said Jon Puetz, program director for SDSU Engineering Extension.

The workshop runs Wednesday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 7:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

The registration fee includes all course training materials, a Code of Federal Regulations Book, refreshments and lunch on the first day.

Course topics during both days of the training focus on safety and health issues as they relate to OSHA compliance during operations at ethanol production facilities. Attendees will become familiar with control methods, test equipment and training requirements. Staff will learn to identify hazards and determine hazard abatement methods while increasing their awareness offering potential for follow-thorough activities when they return to the work site.

For more information on the course, area motels, or to register, contact the SDSU Engineering Extension office at 605-688-4101 or email SDSU.EngineeringExtension@sdsu.edu.

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Opinion

It's Consumer Who Determine Cheap Food Policies

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

We keep waiting for gas prices to go down, for food prices to go down, for crop input costs to go down, for a lot of things to return to the way they used to be — at least the things we don't like. In reality, we want farm input costs to go down, like they used to be a few years back, but we don't want to return to the prices that corn and soybeans and cattle sold at during that time. It doesn't quite work that way. Actually, the only way it works is to look ahead and hope for the future. And I'm thinking that we're going to need a lot of hope.

A colleague of mine shared a discussion he had with a representative of the Humane Society of the United States a few years ago, during which this HSUS rep said that when the U.S. abandoned its "cheap food" policy, the animals would rejoice — apparently because producers who participate in conventional livestock production, aka, the cheap food policy, have no incentive to practice good animal husbandry. This seems a bit far-fetched. It's much more complicated of a situation than that.

Does the United States have a cheap food policy? Of course, if it did, we wouldn't be referring to it as such. And if we do have a cheap food policy, is it the fault of the producer, the agribusiness structure, the government?

I do think U.S. conventional agriculture is based on a "cheap food" system. I don't think the government strives to have "cheap food" policies, but to be as inexpensive as able. What appears to be a cheap food policy is the inherent result. Much of what is in circulation as available foods are "cheap." They're packed with the least expensive ingredients possible, able to appeal to the crowds, but with very little nutrition. They're also very convenient, taking very little if any time to be prepared to eat, able to maintain a long shelf life, and consequently very popular among consumers.

Whose fault is it? Is it the producer's, who continue to plant field after field, year after year, with crops that they'll opt to sell on the Chicago Board of Trade via the local grain elevator? Or the food processors who appeal

to the consumers? Or, what about the government that does indeed have policies that supplement farmers working the conventional market?

The funny thing about markets is that they are all driven by the same basic economic principle: price is determined by supply and demand; too little supply for the demand and the price goes up, and too much supply for the demand and the price goes down. The government is simply giving a safety net to producers for when the markets do their inevitable dips.

Is some of the blame on food processors then? Probably some of the blame is on everyone. But I think the most oft-forgotten piece of the puzzle here is consumers. Here we have food prices on the rise, and who is the most vocal about this? It's not production, processing, or the government — it's the consumer. The outcry is from consumers about the cost of food. Certainly, the cheap food system in the United States churns and will continue to churn because of the demands of the consumer.

Back to the HSUS comment, if the HSUS wants producers to practice good animal husbandry consistently, first of all there needs to be a definition of what is good animal husbandry. And it can't be defined by HSUS, or by producers. It can only be defined by the consumer. HSUS and livestock producers are in essence courting the consumer. I'm not sure many producers understand this, because in many states, HSUS clearly beats out the producers in reaching and persuading consumers to rally behind its agenda.

This doesn't really get down to whether HSUS or livestock producers are right or wrong. It doesn't get down to whether HSUS is a bit naïve in its perspective of the U.S. food system. This gets down to who understands how consumers work — who is behind decisions made about our food. And HSUS has a great deal more influence than producers at this time, because HSUS realizes that it's consumers who decide what goes on their plates and how it gets there — not agriculture or even HSUS itself.

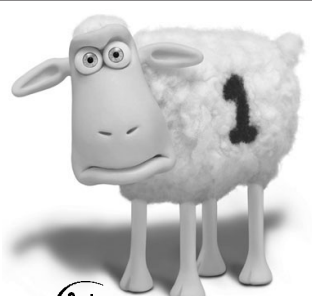
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