

California Proposition 12, the Farm Animal Confinement Initiative

FAQS about Pigs

1. What is a gestation crate?

A gestation crate is an individual enclosure used for pregnant sows. Once sows are bred, they are placed into gestation crates until about a week before they farrow (have piglets). A typical gestation crate is 7 feet by 2 feet, but these dimensions may vary across commercial farms¹.

2. Why are gestation crates used in production?

Gestation crates are used in production in order to reduce aggression and injury to pregnant sows. Aggression often surrounds competition for feed, therefore gestation crates eliminate this opportunity for aggression because the sows are fed individually in crates. In gestation crates, sows are fed manually by hand (often directly onto the floor) or with mechanical drops that have a measured amount of feed that matches the specific sow's nutritional requirements. When they are housed together, sows can be fed manually by hand (again, on the floor), in a trough, with mechanical drop feeders, a trickle feeding system, or an electronic sow feeding system. The trickle feeding system attempts to reduce aggression by delivering feed slowly, discouraging sows from leaving their feed space during the feeding period. Electronic sow feeding (ESF) systems use a computerized system that allows the sows to take turns feeding and distributes measured amounts of feed specific to the sow by reading the ear tag. However, aggression between sows may still occur while they are waiting their turn to be fed with ESF systems².

3. Do sows fight when they are housed together?

Sows in the wild form social groups called "sounders". A sounder is composed of approximately 2-4 sows that form a hierarchy within the group. Once the hierarchy is established, the dominant sow is rarely challenged and the order remains constant. When domestic sows housed in group pens on farms, if the group of sows is relatively small, a hierarchy will be formed. After mixing animals that are unfamiliar with each other, there will be some aggressive behavior to establish the hierarchy, but after this occurs there is little to no fighting within the group throughout gestation. Food competition can provoke aggression within the group of sows, however pens may contain free access stalls to allow sows to escape possible aggression. Free access stalls are attached to the group pen and allow the sow to move freely into and out of stalls to access feed troughs. While in the free access stall, sows are protected from possible aggression from other sows.

4. How much space do pigs have in gestation crates vs. gestation pens?

Gestation crates typically provide about 14 sq. ft. per sow. There is enough room to stand, sit, and lay down, but not enough room to turn around. In gestation pens, sows have at least 20 sq. ft. per individual and the ability to move about freely.

5. How do pigs gestate and farrow in the wild?

In the wild, female sows form groups of about 2-4 sows, called “sounders”. While female piglets remain with their natal sounder once they reach sexual maturity around 8 to 10 months, male piglets leave their sounder before they reach sexual maturity at around 6 to 10 months of age. Mature boars are typically solitary animals and are not part of sounder groups like their female counterparts. When it is time to farrow, the sow will separate herself from the group. She isolates herself about 24-48 hours before giving birth to her piglets. Within this time, she will travel anywhere between about 1 and 4 miles investigating nesting locations. Once she has found a relatively protected area, she begins to construct her nest by rooting a shallow hole and lining it with leaves and branches. A few hours after she builds the nest, she will farrow piglets. The litter will remain in the nest, nursing from the sow, for 7-10 days before re-introduction to the social group. The sow and her litter will rejoin the sounder and the piglets will be weaned anywhere from 8-19 weeks after farrowing.

6. What is a farrowing crate?

A farrowing crate is an individual enclosure for pregnant sows which allows for 14 sq. ft. per sow. Sows can sit, stand, and lie down in a farrowing crate, but they cannot turn around. Sows are housed in farrowing crates during the birth to her piglets (called farrowing) and for 21 to 28 days after (called lactation). Most producers transfer sows from gestation crates to farrowing crates 1 week before her due date. Proposition 12 would require producers to move the sows from gestation pens into farrowing crates for a maximum of 5 days before they are due to farrow.

7. Why are farrowing crates used in production?

There are multiple reasons why farrowing crates are used in production. First and foremost, farrowing crates are used to prevent crushing of piglets by sows, which is a large contributor to piglet mortality. In addition, it ensures that the piglets will have steady access to the sow’s teats and be able to use her as a heat source. Heat lamps are also placed in farrowing crates so that the piglets are able to huddle around the sow or group together under the heat lamp for warmth. A major challenge in pork production is finding a compromise between piglet and sow comfort regarding temperature. Piglets need a very warm environment to survive and sows need to stay cool. Farrowing crates provide piglets with two heat sources (the sow and the heat lamp) and provide distance *between* the sow and the heat lamp. This set-up also makes it easier for the farmers to handle the piglets without concern about aggression from the sow. The maternal instinct of the sow to protect her piglets can make it difficult for the farmer to carry out initial processing and later weaning of the piglets if the sow is not restrained by a farrowing crate.

8. What is the proportion of pigs that are housed in gestation crates in the U.S. currently?

According to the 2012 USDA NAHMS Swine Survey, 76.8% of large-herd sows are housed in total confinement gestation crates in the U.S., but with new legislative and food company pressure, this proportion is expected to decrease.

9. Do other countries have regulations on gestation crates?

Yes, gestation crates are banned in the EU, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and 10 U.S. States. In addition to government bans on gestation crates, leading global pork producers and fast food companies are transitioning to only selling and distributing gestation-crate free pork. These influential companies and producers include Smithfield, Cargill, McDonalds, and Costco. Along with U.S.-based pork producers, Brazilian and South African pork producers are also committing to buying and selling only crate-free pork^{3,4}.

10. How much more does it cost for gestation crate-free pork?

Many food companies, such as McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, Kroger, Safeway, Costco etc., have pledged to purchase pork that only comes from gestation crate-free farms. Some research suggests that gestation crate-free pork could raise the price of conventional pork about \$0.03-\$0.20 per pound depending on the system that the farm adopts. Simply transitioning to gestation pens, rather than crates, will result in pork \$.03-\$.04 more per pound for the consumer, while transitioning to pasture raised or highly bedded production systems would result in an increase of \$.08 - \$.20 per pound of pork⁴. That is not to say that prices at large food companies will change by the same amount.

References

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4. Seibert, L & Norwood, F.B. (2011). Production Costs and Animal Welfare for Four Stylized Hog Production Systems. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 14:1-17.