

# A farrowing crate that's great

With farm animal welfare of increasing concern in the production sector, research efforts are underway to help producers balance profit and good animal care.

One area being studied involves farrowing crates. From a production perspective, there's room to improve conventional rectangular crates. In the EU, they've successfully lobbied against rectangular farrowing crates, and it's expected the crates will be banned in some countries there in the near future. But some kind of farrowing crate is essential. Without, piglets are more likely to be crushed by the sow. Farrowing sows in groups, without crates, may be more aggressive towards other sows and piglets. And, immediately before and after delivery, sows seek seclusion. A farrowing crate addresses these needs.

The search for a better crate has centered around a structure that will allow the sow to act on her instincts. It must also protect her piglets and allow them unobstructed access to her. And it needs to be price competitive and practical.

That's led to the development of an oval farrowing crate. It has several advantages. First, it's wide and long enough - about five feet, by seven feet - to let her turn around. That means she can move freely to build her nest, even if it's only a symbolic gesture. It also allows her to instinctively nurture her piglets. Studies show that for the first 10-14 days she wants to constantly monitor them physically, which the rectangular crates mostly inhibit. And although oval crates are long and wide, they aren't too big - requiring not much more barn floor space than a conventional rectangular crate.

Oval crates also give piglets full access for nursing. No matter what side the sow lies on, her mammarys are available to the piglets, without obstruction by crate bars.

Oval crates are still in the prototype stage. Further research is being conducted to determine the amount of labour required to use them, as well as other production aspects. Early indications are encouraging - oval crates result in an average of about one-half piglet more per weaning than rectangular crates. Because of their strong, non-linear design, oval

crates can be produced with less steel. So, if the crates are no more expensive than rectangular ones, and further research confirms slightly higher animal production, and if they satisfy welfare concerns both from an animal and human perspective, their future may look bright indeed.

Reprinted from *Agri-food research in Ontario* magazine.

Copyright © 1995 **REAP Canada**