

Pigs in space: more room to move

by Hugh Maynard

The Muppets' erstwhile star Miss Piggy and the hog opera "Pigs in Space" may have raised the public profile of the porcine species. But the personification of a common livestock breed has done little to add to the public's understanding of the issues involved in animal welfare.

Intensive livestock production systems, the so-called "factory farms", have come under critical examination for the way they treat animals. Chickens without room to stretch their wings, calves without room to turn around and piglets without teeth, tails and the necessary equipment for propagation.

On the other side of the fence, some modern livestock housing and management practices have greatly increased production while providing improved conditions under which livestock live. The answer to such dilemmas usually lies between the extremes and there has been considerable interest from farmers in incorporating some of the older husbandry practices that emphasize livestock longevity and comfort with the modern management methods that still maintain productivity. Access to pasture and elimination of the most restrictive forms of confinement, such as farrowing crates, are most notable.

Changes by law

One of the leaders in changes to livestock confinement practices is Sweden, which has legislated regulations banning the tethering and caging of swine and making access to pasture mandatory for dairy animals. Swedish farm organizations have adopted a 'better to switch than fight' attitude, choosing to work with the government on implementation in exchange for financial assistance and in a controlled manner, rather than resist and have tougher measures imposed.

Hog farmers will have to give more room per animal, eliminate farrowing crates and redesign the interior of their barns to meet the norms. Dairy farmers will have to construct loose housing units and provide pasture for six months of the year.

Sven-Erik Johansson operates a leased farrow-to-finish swine operation, running 75 sows and fattening 1,600 hogs a year. He already puts the sows and gilts in an outside yard for breeding (year round) and keeps his dry sows in loose pens in an otherwise unfinished barn.

He already uses farrowing pens instead of crates, but even still, the interior of the barn will have to be changed. "We will have to re-build because of the new animal law. We can't fix it up" Johansson says, noting that he will come to some arrangement with the owner of the buildings.

He sells all his pigs to a local butcher and the cuts have the farm name on the label. He regularly goes down to the retail outlet, like a radio DJ at an electronics store 'special event', to help promote the product.

Johansson believes that improving the image of his farm will ultimately make it easier to carry out his operations and sell his product. If renovating the barn is the required investment to meet community standards and continue in business, so be it. He will even have to remove sets of stalls that are used to separate the sows at feeding time, even though they are in loose housing the rest of the time.

City Influence

A tie-stall barn similar to many in Canada is where H el ene and Peter Edling keep their 75 head of Swedish Red & White dairy cattle. The cows are put out on pasture four months of the year; under the new law, that will have to be raised to six.

Peter Edling, like many Swedish farmers, is more aware of the need for change in agricultural production methods compared to his Canadian colleagues. He has already adopted many soil conservation practices and believes that farmers have benefited from technology but that new additions are going too far. Artificial insemination is okay but BST is not necessary.

Like Johansson, he is already following a management strategy that would be considered avant-garde in Canada. Unlike Johansson, he is more circumspect about the new animal welfare regulations.

"It doesn't make sense to force me to put my cows out to pasture six months of the year. In the early spring there is no feed for them and in the autumn it is too wet and cold" he laments.

Edling believes that such arbitrary decisions will eventually be moderated and he doesn't plan to get all wired-up over numbers on a piece of paper. Politicians, he says, change their minds about every three years and he believes they will change some of the regulations once they see how impractical they are.

"When some people from the city drive by in November and see my cows standing knee-high in mud or huddling in the freezing rain around the team door waiting to get in, then there will be a big cry over how the poor dairy cows are being mistreated. And so, we will be allowed to let them in again" he exclaimed with a hint of playful sarcasm in his voice.

The size of farms, the family farm orientation, the type of livestock and crops, as well as the climate are very similar in Canada and Sweden. The Swedish public appears to have a far greater influence on the ethics of animal production than that exercised to date in Canada, although many in the agricultural community believe it is only a question of time before that changes. While individual Canadian farmers experiment with alternative production methods, the Swedish experience will be an interesting one to observe.

Hugh Maynard was recently in Sweden on a professional development grant awarded by the Canadian Farm Writers' Federation.

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