

New Zealand plans to phase out gestation crates for sows

Gestation crates (also known as sow stalls) have been used for many years throughout the pig industry to house sows individually during their 16-week gestation. Narrow and constrictive by design, gestation crates usually have partially- or fully-slatted concrete floors with little or no bedding. Favoured by some producers for management reasons (eg better utilisation of space, ease of cleaning, prevention of aggressive interactions between sows and individual feeding of sows), gestation crates have been shown to have a negative impact on sow health and welfare. Sows are unable to turn around and many normal behaviours, such as rooting and social interaction, are restricted and abnormal stereotypic behaviours, such as bar-chewing and tongue rolling, are increased. Inactivity and concrete floors can also lead to weakened bones, lameness, inflamed joints, and skin abrasions.

Due to the adverse impact of gestation crates on sow welfare, some countries (eg UK, Sweden, Finland, The Netherlands) and some US states (eg Florida, Arizona, California) have banned the use of them completely and alternative systems, such as group housing, are encouraged. Other countries have put in place legislation to phase out the use of gestation crates over the coming years (all European Union member states by 2013, Australia by 2017).

The latest country to legislate against the use of gestation crates is New Zealand. The New Zealand Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), together with the National Animal Welfare Advisory Council (NAWAC), have recently published a new code of welfare for pigs which includes a minimum standard that reduces the use of gestation crates to only four weeks after mating by 2013 and completely prohibits their use by 2015.

The new code of welfare for pigs updates a previous code issued in 2005 and lays out nineteen minimum standards under eight general topics: stockmanship; food and water; shelter and housing; behaviour and management of sows, piglets and boars; handling and husbandry procedures; disease and injury control; emergency humane destruction; and welfare assurance schemes. Welfare codes play a key role in improving the care of animals by describing how best to keep and manage animals and by providing extra detail about areas covered by animal welfare legislation.

Animal Welfare (Pigs) Code of Welfare (December 2010). National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee. A4, 44 pages. ISBN 978-0-478-37503-9 (Print), ISBN 978-0-478-37504-6. Available at <http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/animal-welfare/codes/pigs/index.htm>. Animal Welfare Directorate, MAF Biosecurity New Zealand, PO Box 2526, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

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