

## Why Do Pig Farmers Use Gestation Crates?

What is the best way to house sows? Is it gestation crates? Is it group housing? For most people, sow housing raises a lot of questions. Let me start with saying,

"There is **NO** perfect sow housing. None. Nada."

When housing pregnant sows indoors, there are two basic options: Keep pigs in groups or put them in individual gestation stalls. Market hogs (used for food) are housed in groups. So why are sows housed individually? Because they behave differently.

### **A little background information about our farm . . .**

We have farmed for nearly 40 years and during those years, our farm has changed significantly. Those changes have either improved our lives as farmers, improved the lives of our animals or a combination of both.

Starting with a 96-sow herd, our sows were housed outdoors because frankly, that was our only option. As beginning farmers we were thrilled that we were following our dreams. Our farm consisted of four outdoor dirt lots separated by a fence. Each lot contained a group of 24 sows. They remained in the outdoor lot until it was time for them to give birth, where they were moved into a farrowing (giving birth) barn. They remained in the farrowing barn through the birthing process and until the piglets are weaned, which is about three weeks.

Having sows outdoors was wonderful on the sunny, 70-degree days with a warm breeze blowing across your face. But, unfortunately, we have 5 days a year like that in Minnesota (okay, maybe a little exaggeration). It seems like either it's too windy, too hot, too cold, too dry, too wet, too sunny, etc. You get the picture.

### **In a nutshell, *weather varies a lot* in Minnesota.**

We continued raising pigs in this manner for a few years. But we always knew we needed to make changes if we wanted to raise pigs long-term. Mother Nature is not kind many days. One particular incident I remember like it was yesterday was a perfect example of why we needed to change how we [housed our animals](#).

### **The negative aspect of housing sows outdoors.**

Shortly after a thunderstorm, a sow gave birth to piglets *outside*. She didn't make it in time to farrow (give birth) in the farrowing barn. Even with the best planning, sometimes births happen outdoors. Unbeknownst to us, another sow picked up each of those baby piglets, took them outdoors and

drowned them in a mud puddle.

*Every single one.*

The sight made us sick. Both my husband and I looked at each other in bewilderment as we removed each one of those ten healthy piglets from the mud puddle. We both agreed that day, there must be a better way to take care of our animals. *That day we felt like failures. Absolute failures.* So was the beginning of our journey to build a gestation barn with individual gestation pens.

Our decision did not come easy. It took time, lots of farm discussion meetings, multiple trips to the loan officer and numerous discussions with our veterinarian, who was our animal consultant.

### **Pigs Inherent Behaviors**

Most people don't realize that pigs are pack animals - they actually exhibit some of the same behaviors as wolf packs. Because they are pack animals, they need to establish a hierarchy within the group - or a "boss" sow. The way they establish this hierarchy is by attacking/fighting/killing each other. I personally have seen broken backs, broken legs, bitten/torn off ears and tails, and bitten/torn off vulvas. And not only are sows physically attacked - they also bully others from eating. In addition, fighting results in terminated pregnancies.

*It's not pretty.*

### **Genetic Changes**

In addition to animal well-being issues, consumers' tastes were also changing. They were demanding a leaner cut of pork. In order to provide leaner pork, our pig genetics had to change. We now raise a cross-breed between a Large White and Landrace pig. The result? A long, lean pig--perfect for lean and nutritious pork. Prior to housing our animals inside, our main focus for pig genetics was survival of Minnesota's winters, which was a completely different genetic line based on different goals.

In addition to weather problems and the sow's pecking order, we were also concerned about:

- sunburn
- insect bites
- disease transmission by birds or rodents
- people being injured by sows
- wildlife predators

## **Life in Gestation Crates.**

After our gestation barn was built and the day we brought our sows inside, we noticed a difference in our sow's behavior immediately. Our sows were now *content*. No longer were they having to fear the "boss sow." ***They now had protection.***

Research shows that sows housed in stalls have a lower stress hormone than those housed in groups. In addition to animal contentment, we could now eliminate nearly all the weather issues. Temperature and fan controllers were used in the barns to help manage temperatures and bring in clean air. All sows had access to clean water and the proper amount of fresh feed. We now --could ensure they *all* ate--no more skinny or fat sows. In the summer, we kept them cool with a water sprinkling system, which is so important because pigs do not sweat. And we could give individual medical care, if needed.

## **Accepted Sow Housing**

Sow housing is an individual choice. For our farm, individual gestation pens were the right choice. But for others, group housing works for them. Both the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Swine Veterinarians agree that *both* types of housing are acceptable. *The real key to animal care is not the type of housing but, rather, the management of those animals.*

*Read that last sentence one more time . . . It's the management that matters.*

According to an employee from Smithfield Foods, who has already made the decision to move their sows into group housing, observed that given a choice, [90% of the sows prefer to spend 90% of their time in individual stalls.](#) And research backs this observation.

Farmers do care for their animals by working as a team with veterinarians and animal nutritionists. Animal mistreatment on farms makes as much sense as a car dealer keying his inventory. And none of us are "keying cars."

I have included a few great videos of sow housing and information about pig farming.

[Kansas State University video on gestation stalls.](#)

[Sow Housing Video](#)

[What I Wish People Knew About Pig Farming](#)

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