

What I Wish People Knew About Pig Farming

Recently, I participated in an online video discussion with an Animal Welfare class from an eastern U.S. university. The purpose of the class was to give class attendees a farmer's perspective on pig issues related to animal welfare. There were two of us, myself and another farmer from Indiana. We were given a few questions ahead of time, but we also answered questions directly from the class. By the end of the class period, it was apparent there was a definite flavor of animal rights views within the classroom. Later, as I pondered about the class discussion, I thought very hard about the animal right's perspective and agenda. I really wanted to "see" animal welfare issues through their eyes. I struggled. I think what is most frustrating for farmers is how do we communicate our experiences so others also *feel* the same experiences and compassion we feel. Thus, this is what I wish people knew about pig farming:

I wish others could experience the things we experience. I wish they could see the fights sows have, which are a natural response to their innate social hierarchy that determines who is "king" sow. The fights that result in injuries such as bites to body parts including ears, snouts, vulvas and legs. And sometimes these injuries are lethal. I wish people could hear the ear piercing screams we hear when a sow is attacking another. No, we don't rush to grab our phones to videotape the pig attacks. Instead, we attempt to break up the fights, assess and care for the injuries, all while hoping not to injure ourselves.

I wish people could see the peaceful contentment sows experience when they are housed in individual gestation stalls. I wish they could see how pigs respond when they no longer fear for their lives and are safe. I wish people could see the "night and day" difference between sows that are housed outdoors and sows that are housed in gestation stalls because we are able to give them specialized, individual care.

I wish people were on our farm to see the looks on our faces after the drowning of newborn piglets who were savagely placed there by another pregnant sow. The horrified looks when we discovered a total of 10 baby piglets laying at the bottom of a mud puddle, a mud puddle created by a recent thunderstorm. I wish they could experience our heartbreak as we removed each baby pig from the mud puddle. And I wish they also had my memory as I still remember it like it was yesterday. Or the frustration when an unruly sows bites at her newly born pigs or accidentally lays or steps on one. I wish people understood this is why sows are housed in farrowing (birthing) stalls to prevent these heartaches. And, yet, non-farming people thinks farrowing stalls are cruel. They honestly haven't seen cruel until they see deaths that could have been prevented.

I wish people could see the realities of disease. Diseases that cause nearly 100% mortality of newborn pigs for 4-5 weeks. I wish people could walk in barns and see nothing but dead baby pigs and knowing there is absolutely *nothing* you can do about it and the despair that follows. I wish people were on my farm that Thanksgiving Day when my determined husband was going to **save**

newborn pigs who were doomed for an imminent death because of a virus. A virus with no vaccine or a treatment drug. Only to realize his heroic efforts went to waste. I wish people could see the look on his face upon the realization that he didn't succeed, and yet, managed somehow to look forward to the next day because "it will be a better day." Farmers live in reality, not ideology.

I wish people realized that "natural" behaviors are not always best for pigs. "Natural" that can result in bullied animals, injuries and death. But animal rightists look past and turn their heads to the painful consequences when pigs are allowed to exhibit their "natural" behaviors towards each other. In their eyes, natural is best. *Natural is not always best. **Comfortable and content pigs is what is best.***

It's easy and feels good to reach for ideology. It's pleasurable to visualize the sunny 70-degree days where pigs roam pastures under trees and never hurt one another. You know, the whole Charlotte's Web scenario. Who wouldn't love a world like that? But we don't live in Charlotte's Web's book, we live in reality.

As a farmer, our main goal is to eliminate or reduce stressors in a pig's life. Stressors such as thirst, hunger, disease, unsafe environment, temperature extremes, weather conditions, unclean air and pig behaviors. Our challenge is to create a *balance* where we reduce/eliminate as many stressors as possible that results in making a pig's life as comfortable as possible. That is real pig farming.

I think it's easy for outsiders to tell us and insist on how we should or shouldn't raise pigs. But the problem is most of these people do not experience the same things we do. They do not see what we see. They do not hear what we hear.

Farmers raise pigs in many different ways. One way is not better than another. I truly believe pig farmers raise pigs in the way that works best for them. And we *need every pig farmer*. Our ultimate goal is to raise safe and affordable food for families.

Farmers work diligently to improve their farming practices continually. We take better care of our pigs than we did yesterday. And tomorrow, we will do better than today. Are we perfect? Not by a long shot, but we really do *care* about what we do and we continue to improve every single day.