



CASTRATION, STALLS, and EUTHANASIA

three major issues confronting the pig industry



Producers are doing a good job of animal care and handling, says this Guelph scientist, but more research is still needed to live up to consumer expectations

Tina Widowski, a professor in the department of animal and poultry science and director of the Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare at the University of Guelph, says animal welfare is now being seen as part of a broader food safety and good quality product package. As a result, on-farm animal care assessments

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and welfare audits at packing plants are cropping up across Canada.

"Look at global trends," she says. "In Europe, Australia and some U.S. states, sow stalls are being prohibited or voluntarily phased out. In certain countries, pigs must be kept on straw, routine tail docking is not allowed and castration without pain relief is under scrutiny."

Pointing to sow stalls, castration and euthanasia as three of the major issues confronting the pig industry, she says lameness in sows and overall pain management are also frequently debated subjects. The same holds true for all livestock industries in which routine surgeries are carried out without the use of analgesics and anesthetics.

"Many researchers and, more importantly, informed consumers are saying, 'If we have the means to control the pain, why don't we use them?'" she adds.

Widowski says sow stalls generate considerable debate. So does whether the gestating animals should be placed in alternative housing systems, where welfare can also be compromised when sows are placed in groups. This is largely because of the need for a high level of stockmanship and feeding management to prevent animal aggression.

Her research on euthanasia, funded by the National Pork Board in the United States, has focused on how to terminate non-viable, low-birth-weight piglets. While blunt trauma has proven to be humane, researchers are currently looking into more aesthetic methods, such as non-penetrating captive bolts for piglets. Others are considering the more controversial method of placing the animals in a container filled with carbon dioxide.

"There is really not a lot of research yet on selecting the best way to euthanize animals on farms," says Widowski. "Carbon dioxide, for example, is quick but, depending on how it is delivered, the animal can feel a sense of suffocation. Methods like blunt trauma can take an emotional toll on stock people, particularly those in farrowing. We have to find a better way."

As for producers, she says they are rightfully proud of their procedures and, overall, are doing a good job in terms of care, handling and the animals' environmental surroundings within the currently accepted systems. "But there are definitely welfare concerns within those systems and changes are needed in a new world of consumer and retail expectations," Widowski said.

Producers can demonstrate the level of care they provide by participating in the Canadian Pork Council's Animal Care Assessment (ACA), which is based on the Pig Codes of Practice.

In Canada, the codes of practice for pigs are being updated with funding from the federal government (refer to <http://www.nfacc.ca/>). Organizations like the Canadian Pork Council (CPC) are taking the next step — the animal care assessment program.

"Our next research project, funded by Ontario Pork and the Canadian Swine Research and Development Cluster and conducted in collaboration with the CPC, is going to be comparing the on-farm animal welfare assessments in Canada, the United States and Europe," Widowski says.

Producers and members of the general public interested in obtaining more information on these programs can visit the websites <http://www.nfacc.ca/Default.aspx> and www.cqa-aqc.ca/aca/index-e.php. □