

Freedom farrowing pens

Practical experience

At Weda, people have also been contemplating the term „free farrowing“ for quite some time.

SCROFA⁺: Mr Meyer, how can your practical experience with the construction of pens be summarised?

I'm of the opinion that absolutely free farrowing (without piglet protection cages) is not possible according to the current state of knowledge.

Regarding the question of pen construction: firstly, the pen shouldn't be too big. Bigger isn't always better. On the contrary, too much space can lead to an increase in suckling pig losses.

Square pens are also rather problematic, but a trapezoidal pen on the other hand ensures that the sow tends to lie down more slowly on the intended area.

Experience has also shown that trapezoidal and

triangular pens make it difficult for sows to „roll“ from the belly position into the side position. Due to this dangerous rolling, between

Bigger isn't always better

50% and 70% of the crush losses in piglets have occurred according to various surveys.

A good pen should also have a „fresh nose ventilation system“. This animates the sow to lay its head towards the trough on the intended surface.

The piglet nest must not be too far away from the sow's rear otherwise the piglets often don't find it after birth. In a test facility we had to build another second piglet nest with a mat and lamp next to the sow.

The open piglet protection cage has to continue to

serve the sow as a resting aid. If possible, it should be close to the sow's lying surface (concrete and cast iron are recommended) so that the sow has stability.

An important point is also the refuge areas for the piglets: these have to be present all around.

SCROFA⁺: What needs to be considered concerning management/handling?

After the cross-fostering, the sow should remain fixed for about 2 days. Otherwise the danger is too great that she attacks foreign piglets. After two days, foreign piglets have taken on the litter smell and are no longer perceived as foreign.

Also, a sow should be fixed if possible only one day before the birth. She should be given the opportunity to get to know her pen and she must practice lying down and standing up before the piglets run around between her legs. The piglet protection cage may only be opened when the piglets are fast enough (at least 5 days after birth) to be able to get to safety when the sow lies down.

Good supplementary feeding helps to optimally

Good supplementary feeding helps sows and piglets

supply large litters and to relieve the burden on the sow. The number of weak piglets, the runts who can't flee fast enough, is also minimised.

Experiments have also shown that the more litters the sow has had in a varia-



Interview with Ralf Meyer, 47

He has been with WEDA since 1989.

From 2001 to 2009, Project Manager for pig feeding systems and piggery facilities „worldwide“.

Head of Development since 2009.

Has been intensively involved with freedom farrowing systems since 2012.

ble-restraint pen, the lower the mortality rate.

SCROFA⁺: Where do you see a need for political action?

There are simply always „non-suitable variable-restraint pen“ sows – about 10% of the group. They have to remain fixed during the entire suckling period. It would be fatal if the le-

Piglet losses must be minimized

gistrator did not allow „problem sows“ to be fixed during the suckling period to protect the piglets. In the „Abferkelbucht 2020“ [Farrowing Pen 2020] project in which WEDA worked as a project partner, there was a sow that killed 10 piglets and one that even killed 13 piglets. Such animals need to remain fixed in the piglet protection cage.

Also, no animal welfare should take place strictly according to the book. Larger pens don't automatically provide more animal welfare than smaller ones. For example in the „Pro-Sau“ project in Austria, three pens with 5.5 m² were examined. Piglet losses in these „small“ pens ranged from 9.89% to 12.03%. Two larger pens were also examined. The losses in the larger pen were higher.

Most of our customers have opted for 5.5 to 6 m²

and operate these pens with good success. If the sow has considerably more space, it can „roll“ as desired. This must still be pre-

SCROFA⁺: Many thanks indeed for the interview.



vented.

Even in organic husbandry, rolling is still a problem. For this reason a pipe is often installed in the middle of the pen. Although this restricts rolling, the piglets are still crushed on this pipe because they have no escape option.

From participants active in different committees I repeatedly hear that the NVO is going to stipulate 6.5 m² for a minimum width of 2.1 m of pen area in the future. I hope they'll soon agree on to 6 m² so that farmers can finally regain planning security.



The FiT pen is the further development of the triangular pen. It combines the advantages of animal welfare with occupational safety and work facilitation. The integrated inspection walkway makes it very easy for farmers to carry out all work without entering the pen.