



Target

Farm

Action

A monthly digest of practical advice for pig farmers from BPEX

Prioritise protein over back fat?

A common perception that gilts need a minimum of 14 mm back fat at first farrowing and that back fat is the most important factor for sow longevity was strongly challenged at recent BPEX workshops. Prof. Paul Hughes, South Australia Research and Development Institute said that protein mass is more important than back fat in gilts for lifetime performance. Recent research supports this view.

Why are we still so focused on back fat in gilts during rearing and the first pregnancy? Prof. Hughes pointed out that over the last 10-20 years selection has produced a very different pig, which:

- Matures later (later puberty)
- Is a heavier and leaner sow
- Has a higher ovulation rate (but will ovulate smaller, lower quality oocytes).

He said that often:

- 15-20% of gilts only produce one litter
- 40-50% of sows are culled before third parity, and
- At least three litters are required to achieve profit from a sow

It is becoming more apparent that the relationship between body fat level and the sow's lifetime productivity is very poor, as shown in Canadian studies. This may reflect the fact that the majority of tissue mobilisation in young lactating sows is protein not fat.

While it would be nice to target 14-16 mm P2 back fat at first farrowing, this is unachievable in many modern genotypes.

The point is not to ignore back fat altogether but, since few producers actually measure it, weight and general body condition may be more useful measures on farm. Prof. Hughes suggested aiming for a weight range of 135-150 kg at first service.

If the gilt's protein requirement is not met, it can cause a delay in puberty and reduced ovulation rate. The modern gilt appears to need to reach a certain protein mass to achieve optimum reproductive performance. Some nutritionists are already recommending a diet for growing gilts which allows optimal protein deposition. Getting weight and body condition right at first service

are important factors in preparing gilts for their first litter and improving second parity performance. Evaluate your gilt and young sow performance along with general sow longevity and discuss a protocol for your herd with your vet and nutritionist.



High health helps gilts perform

Gilt health status cannot be underestimated. Last year, herd performance on producer Chris Fogden's unit had bottomed out at about 18 pigs weaned per sow per year, mostly due to low numbers born. He had tried everything to get numbers back up but nothing helped.

Fortunately, he found a financially viable way to re-stock. His neighbours were nearing the end of re-stocking their four herds and had spare capacity at their gilt mating site. The results from the neighbour's re-stocked herds were superb, giving some assurance of success. They were able to deliver a new herd for Chris as he ran down his old herd, giving just ten days pig-free and eight weeks without weaner sales. The first gilts farrowed in April last year.

A year later, Chris' production is up by more than six pigs weaned, at 24.4 pigs per sow per year. Farrowing rate is around 91% and sows are producing 2.4 litters per year. Locally, herds are now all of a similar, high health status. To help maintain this, Chris uses the same source of gilts as the neighbouring unit and they have adopted the same management practices such as using natural service instead of AI.

Full steam ahead

For a farm to realise the potential of any asset, there must be a sound understanding of the production capabilities and restrictions. This is equally true for your staff.

Practical experience is priceless on a pig unit, but life moves on and production systems evolve. All of which mean that continuous development of staff is essential to achieve the new BPEX 2TS target of an industry average of two tonnes of pig meat per sow per year.

To realise the best from your staff, you need to think STEAM.

This should be reviewed regularly and become a continuous cycle on farm.

Whatever route is taken to achieving the 2TS target, it will only work if staff embrace the challenge. So, before you look for new equipment and ideas, think about investments closer to home, and review the most valuable asset on any farm – quality staff. Who knows, you might keep them too!

To find out more about 2TS, visit BPEX on stand 48

at the British Pig and Poultry Fair, 11-12 May 2010.



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