



The modern gilt and boar contact management

Achieving two tonnes of pig meat per sow per year, which will require approximately 25 pigs sold per sow per year, is dependent on many factors. The starting point is breeding herd productivity and the foundation of the breeding herd is the gilt.

With 20 - 25% of production attributable to this parity at any one time, it has great influence on the annual output. Plus, it is particularly important that there are sufficient gilts available to enable the planned culling of less productive or old sows and maintain the target parity profile.

How do you manage your gilts to ensure there are enough available for service in the optimum body condition, at the right time? Firstly you have to remember that today's gilt is a 'different beast' compared to that of 10 to 20 years ago, being later maturing and significantly leaner. Back fat per se is not as important as weight for age and body condition.

The target weight at service is typically between 130 to 150 kg but some units, especially outdoors, may want a larger, older gilt to promote longevity. Irrespective of the target body condition, the gilt still needs to have achieved at least two cycles by the time she reaches her target weight.

To stimulate puberty you must carefully manage the contact with mature boars (at least 10 months old). If she has contact with mature boars when she is too immature to respond to their stimuli, ie before 180 days, then she will become habituated and not respond to them when she matures. As a result, the gilt will not reach puberty until an older age.

Professor Paul Hughes recommended the following practices for boar management at the Knowledge Transfer event 'Back to the Future':

- Start when gilts are 180 – 200 days old
- Ensure gilts have at least 1.5m² of space
- Use boar 10 months old +
- Use a regularly-mating boar
- Give full physical contact (same pen)
- Give boar contact every day
- Allow 15-20 minutes/day contact
- Expose gilts in groups of 12 or less

Once the gilts are cycling you can record their heat, plan their service date and make informed culling decisions. Also, by identifying those gilts that do not cycle with their peers, you can decide to cull them at this stage based on the fact that gilts that have a delayed puberty are more likely be less productive as sows.

Remember the chaser boar

Remember the chaser boar when making preparations to reduce heat stress this summer.

Sperm production occurs at 2-4°C below body temperature so extreme heat causes problems, especially outdoors. If you use natural service boar fertility accounts for 50% of the progeny but potentially 100% of the output.



Poor quality semen affects conception and litter size, impacting on the bottom line.

The boar's scrotum and pampiniform plexus help maintain the right temperature but the boar in particular is at high risk because a third of the testicles are inside the boar, making them less effective than other mammals with fully suspended scrotums.

So what can you do? Provide:

- Wallows
- Shade
- Space for lying
- Think about using AI for returns and, on natural service units, using AI six to eight weeks after extreme heat.

Oestrus control using hormones

Oral progestagens have been used successfully for many years to suppress oestrus, primarily in gilts.

They are an invaluable management aid which allows you to programme when gilts will cycle, to fit in with service shortfalls for example.

Groups of gilts can also be synchronised to facilitate their nutritional management and ensure a tight farrowing pattern.

The progestagen is fed for 18 days, the withdrawal day coinciding with the weaning day of the sows.

There are a number of 'best practice' principles to ensure that you achieve 90% or



more of gilts cycling at five to seven days post withdrawal:

- Ensure that the gilt has already achieved puberty

● Don't start the programme if the gilt is already in oestrus as she should cycle in synchrony anyway and results have been poorer with these gilts

● Preferably feed the gilts individually, or physically dose as illustrated. They can be trained with apple juice or cod liver oil initially.

● If group feeding, feed 1 kg of feed plus progestagen per gilt initially and distribute to allow sufficient space for the gilt to eat her allocation. Feed the remaining daily allowance once the treated food has been consumed.

● Once the progestagen has been withdrawn the gilts should receive boar contact daily to stimulate oestrus as normal.