



Best Practices: How Do You Measure Up?

By Geoff Geddes, for Swine Innovation Porc

Just when you think you have all the answers, someone changes the questions. That's true of the rapidly evolving pork business, where keeping up on the latest practices and strategies is a must.

To support producers in that effort, an audit of on-farm best management practices at 24 Canadian farms was carried out in 2017. The audits were one of five pillars in the project "From Innovation to Adoption: On-farm Demonstration of Swine Research" conducted by Centre de développement du porc du Québec (CDPQ) and Prairie Swine Centre, and funded by Swine Innovation Porc.

Farrowing Systems

You can do everything else right on the farm, but if you trip up in that crucial time from birth to weaning, things can go terribly wrong. Fortunately, the audit revealed that Canadian pork producers excel at farrowing management, consistently employing weaning at 3 or 4 weeks of age.

Results also showed that participants are getting it right on the critical aspect of providing the optimal environment for piglets. The vast majority is using heat lamps or pads, and over half employ both, starting with lamps just after farrowing and transitioning to heat pads to cut utility costs.

Almost 90% of the farms use creep feeding, usually 5-7 days prior to weaning. Though this practice in the farrowing room has shown no benefit to piglet body weight at weaning, it does enhance nursery performance for pigs that consume creep feed. However, research indicates

only 4% to 40% of piglets consume creep feed in the farrowing room. According to research, putting creep feed in a tray feeder rather than a standard feeder increases both the number of pigs consuming it and the average consumption per animal.

Nursery Facilities

On most counts, producers from the audit did well when it came to equipping nursery facilities with basic elements: dry environment free of drafts, fresh air and sufficient feed and water. The only aspect where the report card read "in need of improvement" was enrichment, something that is drawing greater attention since the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Pigs was revised.

Though the Code requires multiple forms of enrichment to enhance animal welfare, only 11% of participating farms provide any, primarily chains. The most suitable type of enrichment will vary from farm to farm, so producers are encouraged to review support material in



Photo: Prairie Swine Centre





the Code that outlines the different enrichment options and the pros and cons of each one (this information may be found in Section 1.8 and Appendix H of the Code).

The length of time pigs remain in the nursery is another key consideration, and the audits found consistency here, with 5 to 7 weeks being the chosen period for 90% of farms. Group size in the nursery showed more variation, as two thirds of producers had fewer than 50 pigs per pen, with one third opting for larger groups.

Finishing Facilities

How you start is critical, but how you finish is equally important. If the bad news is that success in finishing requires rigorous and regular attention to detail, the good news is that even small adjustments at this stage can mean a big payoff for producers. For the most part, those in the audit scored high in several key areas of finishing. Areas of possible improvement include enrichment, re-assessment of sorting pigs and water availability.

Though enrichment is more prevalent in the finishing barn than the nursery, one third of audited producers have yet to adopt it. Among the other two thirds, 70% chose chains and 30% went with wood.

Most participants have installed wet/dry feeders in the pens; however, about half use it as their sole water source. Research shows that even one additional drinker sparks a large improvement in average daily gain and feed efficiency.

Audit results indicate approximately half of farms sort pigs when they are moved into finishing. Research reinforces that sorting based on nutritional needs does not benefit finisher pigs that are fed *ad libitum*; however, it can be helpful when split-

sex feeding is incorporated and for newly weaned pigs.

Managing Water Intake

Like oxygen, water is only appreciated when it's absent. For finisher pigs, water is their most valuable nutrient, with intake up to three times that of feed. Unfortunately, finishing pigs can waste up to 25% of water from well-managed nipple drinkers, so adjusting flow rates on a regular basis is critical.

Based on audit results, two thirds of nipple drinkers in finishing barns exceeded the recommended flow rate. Optimal rates for drinkers are 1.0 – 2.0 L/min in farrowing, and 0.5 – 1.5 L/min in other areas of production. For mounting, nipple drinkers should be set to shoulder height when mounted at 90°, and, when mounted at 45°, to 5 cm or 2 inches above the back of the pen's smallest pig.

Though this audit was not exhaustive in its scope, it did highlight key areas of production and provide some timely answers; at least, until they change the questions again. 😊

For more information....

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For more details about the 2017 audit of 24 Canadian farms, [click here to visit Prairie Swine Centre's website.](#)