



Multiple Choices: Group Housing a Test for Researchers

By Geoff Geddes, for Swine Innovation Porc

Q: What concerns producers most about the move to group sow housing?

- a. Cost
- b. Uncertainty
- c. Lack of Information

Though research never claims to have all the answers, members of the National Sow Housing Conversion Project feel that “c” is a good place to start. As Canadian pork producers transition to group sow housing, they face major renovations to existing buildings or construction of new barns, along with significant changes to daily management. While they battle cost and uncertainty along the way, knowledge can be a powerful ally in winning the war.

“This project aims to arm producers with the best possible information by documenting four barns as they navigate the conversion process and ten sites that have already converted to group housing,” said Dr. Jennifer Brown, Research Scientist - Ethology at the Prairie Swine Centre.



Dr. Brown working with a producer.
Photo: Prairie Swine Centre

Some neighborly advice

The approach is based on a sound principle: Producers who have already implemented group sow housing successfully are potentially the best resource to provide other producers with credible information on what is needed for the transition.

One of the most critical areas to consider in making the move is the choice of feeding system.

Feed for thought

“It’s interesting that most early adopters went with electronic sow feeding (ESF), as this system allows greater control of individual feeding and can accommodate higher sow numbers per square foot than other systems.”

Competitive feeding systems may hold appeal for some because they’re cheaper to implement, but they’re also harder to manage on a daily basis and incur extra feed costs as producers will end up overfeeding the dominant animals to ensure that subordinate ones get enough to eat.

Ignorance is far from blissful

This is a prime example of needing all the facts to inform your decision. Researchers found that some producers were unaware of how much work goes into training sows on the ESF system and managing gilts during the training period.

“A couple of farms installed ESF feeders and then realized they needed dedicated feeders and rooms to train gilts.”



Left: ESF Feeders.
Below: Group pen.
Photos: Prairie Swine Centre



Feeding systems are just one of many challenges in moving to group housing; still, Dr. Brown said the feedback has been mostly positive.

Up close and personal

“By and large, producers are very happy with the changes. They all like the fact that it’s easier to interact with sows in group housing and they can appreciate their individual traits and behaviors more with a group setting than with stalls. One farmer in Alberta said his sows move more easily to the farrowing room now as they’re used to moving around, so they tend to be fitter, calmer and not spooked as easily.”

As they scrutinize all aspects of these farms, researchers are documenting their findings and producing a website and photo gallery showing each farm, barn layouts, descriptions of the renovations and tips on sow management for staff.

“We’re also trying to get as much costing information as we can, and ‘before and after’ production numbers where possible.”

In addition to the website, they’ve produced newsletters outlining some of the science behind group housing, mixing times, updates from different provinces, the pros and cons of various feeding systems and advice on evaluating your current barn for its renovation potential.

Words of wisdom

Through it all, their focus is getting the word out to producers and providing one-on-one support to anyone who needs it.

“I would encourage people to contact me or one of the other researchers if they have questions around conversion. Even if they’re not renovating right away, group housing is more complicated than working with stalls and involves a variety of feeding systems and management options. The more aware you are of these factors and how they might fit with your barn and management style, the better off you’ll be and the wiser choices you will make in the long term.”

So if it’s a question of what makes this project so valuable for producers, whether it’s the thoroughness, relevance or timely information, the answer is clear:

All of the above. 😊

Learn more...

For more information about the work described in this article, please contact Dr. Jennifer Brown at jennifer.brown@usask.ca

Additional resources related to the *National Sow Housing Conversion Project* may be found at:

groupsowhousing.com

swineinnovationporc.ca

Publication of this article has been made possible by Swine Innovation Porc within the Swine Cluster 2: Driving Results Through Innovation research program. Funding is provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada’s AgriInnovation Program and by provincial producer organizations.

