Post Weaning Diets: A Simple Solution

By Geoff Geddes, for Swine Innovation Porc

Next to predicting Canadian weather, the biggest challenge for pork producers is trying to trim costs without affecting quality.

The latter was the focus of researchers on the project *Simple versus complex post-weaning diets* (K. de Lange and V. Farzan). With nursery diets getting quite expensive and given the improvements in housing and management, they wondered if industry could get away with a much cheaper diet, even if it meant pigs would grow a bit slower at first.

"In the 1980s, the swine industry had some challenges in performance with newly weaned pigs," said research team member Dr. Robert Friendship, Professor, Department of Population Medicine at the University of Guelph.

"As a result, nutritionists moved away from traditional corn and soybean rations in favor of higher-priced products like whey and fish meal."

This shift to a more complex, expensive post-weaning diet required a change in thinking by producers. While it eventually caught on, some began to wonder if the industry had gone too far.

Source: University of Guelph

When less is more

"In light of how we've managed pigs and health control, we started thinking 'maybe we don't need quite as good a diet at that stage'," said Dr. Friendship.

In testing that hypothesis, researcher Kees de Lange compared diets of high and low complexity at the University of Guelph. While the results were promising, there was concern that the outcomes may change on commercial farms due to disease challenge or other stress factors.

To address that concern, researchers followed 14 cohorts of pigs on seven commercial farms representing a variety of health statuses. Although the pigs receiving the cheaper soybean diet started off poorly and had limited growth early on, by the end of the nursery period they had caught up to animals on the more expensive rations.

"When the pigs from each group went to market,

they looked identical and the carcass evaluations were virtually the same. There was concern that with compensatory growth the weight gain might be all viscera, but here it was clearly muscle."

They also examined salmonella shedding to see if the pigs with more irritated and inflamed guts from the simpler meals had more problems in that regard, but found no difference between the two groups.

Frugal is fine

"The overall conclusion was that generally these poorer, cheaper diets can work quite well and save producers some money in the process."

So producers will read the results and immediately switch to the less expensive approach, right?

Like everything in the pork industry, moving to a simpler diet may not be that simple.

"This is not an easy sell for people in the feed industry. You are going onto a farm with no problems where pigs are growing well and asking the producer to use a cheaper diet that will have their animals looking worse at the beginning."

Just as the challenge in the 80s was persuading farmers to go the more expensive route, now the message may be to move the other way.

On your mark, get set, go slowly

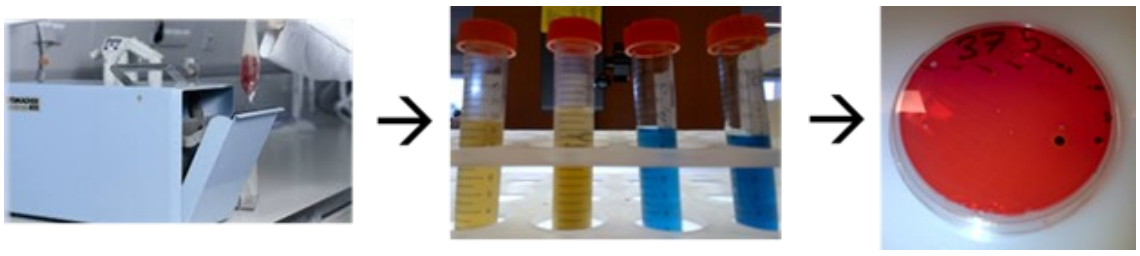
"You hear so many talks today where the message is 'do everything you can to get pigs off to a good start in the nursery'. These findings are all about educating industry that it's okay if your pigs have a rough start as they will catch up."

Ultimately, each farm will have to look at the research results and decide for themselves.

"There are probably some farms where the disease challenge is such that they need a better diet. In most cases, it's a matter of overcoming the reluctance to change anything when what you're doing now is working. I don't think uptake of these findings will happen overnight; it will be a gradual pendulum swinging back and then forward a bit more each time, with perhaps some fine tuning of the diet in the process."

Given that feed accounts for 60-70% of production costs, this research may help you trim your costs and boost your bottom line.

As for predicting the weather…you're on your own.



Salmonella culturing. Source: University of Guelph

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