



ASSESSMENT OF COMPLIANCE WITH EU LEGISLATION ON HOUSING OF PREGNANT SOWS

Conversion of individual housing to group housing of pregnant sows offers the animals more net floor area for locomotion, exploration and social interaction. However, converted buildings often result in suboptimal housing systems and difficulties in interpretation. New houses more often comply with the EU regulations.

SUMMARY OF THE EU DIRECTIVE REFERRING TO SOW HOUSING (2008)

IN THE EU DIRECTIVE GILTS AND SOWS ARE DISTINGUISHED AS FOLLOW:

- “Gilt” is a female pig after puberty and before farrowing
- “Sow” is a female pig after the first farrowing
- “Dry pregnant sow” is a sow between weaning her piglets and the perinatal period

IN THE EFSA REPORT ON THE WELFARE OF SOWS (2007), SOME RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH GOALS FOR GROUP HOUSING SYSTEMS INCLUDE:

- Improving floor quality to prevent lameness
- Minimising aggression by reducing the occurrence of mixing (premixing, sorting, no regrouping)
- Developing systems that allow more freedom between weaning and 4 weeks pregnancy
- Providing a fibrous diet and foraging material

✓ On all pig farms with 10 or more sows all gilts and sows should be kept in groups from 4 weeks after service until 1 week before farrowing. For fewer than 6 pigs per pen the minimum length of the sides should be 2.4 m and for larger groups 2.8 m. Minimum “unobstructed floor area” per gilt is 1.64 m² and per sow 2.25 m². In smaller groups (<6) 10% more space is required whereas 10% less space per sow is allowed in larger groups (≥40). Sows and gilts should have **access to manipulable material and sufficient bulky or high-fibre food**. Measures shall be taken to minimise aggression in groups. These Welfare Regulations were adopted by the EU in 2001 and republished in Directive 120/2008/EC.

✓ For concrete slatted **floors** the maximum slot width is 20 mm and minimum slot width is 80 mm. If other materials are used the “floors must be smooth but not slippery to prevent injury to the pigs and so designed, constructed and maintained as not to cause injury or suffering to pigs (paragraph 5, Chapter 1, Annex 1 of Directive 2008/120/EC. They must be suitable for the size and weight of the pigs and, if no litter is provided, form a rigid, even and stable surface”.

✓ Several countries have stricter rules (Mul et al., 2010) which may be viewed as desirable. In the UK and Sweden sows must be loose housed immediately after weaning. In the Netherlands they can be kept individually till 4 days after service. **All countries follow the EU regulations with 2.25m² per sow including at least 1.30 m² continuous solid floor of which a maximum 15% is reserved for drainage openings.**

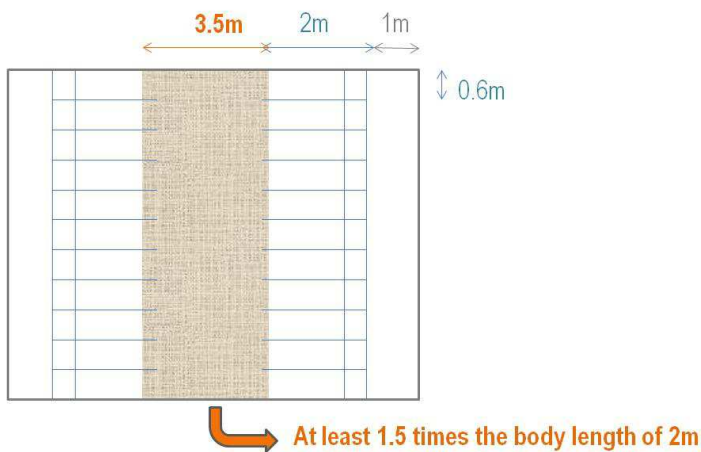
POSSIBLE DIFFICULTIES IN INTERPRETATION

1 - According to the EU Regulations gilts and sows require different space allowances. However a large proportion of pig farms keep gilts and sows together in a mixed group from shortly after first life insemination. Moreover an inspector may find it difficult to distinguish gilts and first parity sows within a group (the animals do not have passports). It would be clearer if the term “sow” meant all female pigs after their first lifetime insemination.

2 - Some member states have specific interpretations regarding solid floors. For example, in the Netherlands the 1.3 m² solid floor allowance per sow should be one undivided area. Maximum percentages of openings in a solid floor are 10% and 5% in Denmark and the Netherlands, respectively, with maximum slot widths of 10 mm or a maximum diameter of 20 mm for circular openings. The EU maximum of 15% is close to the proportion of openings in standard concrete slatted floors.

3 - The EU regulations state that “All pigs must be fed at least once a day. Where pigs are fed in groups and not ad libitum or by an automatic system feeding the animals individually, each pig must have access to the food at the same time as the others in the group.” **This means that restricted fed sows should be fed simultaneously or separated from pen mates by a fence.** Sequential restricted feeding systems with no protection for the feeding sow are not allowed in order to prevent competition. Ad libitum feeders without protection around feeding are allowed when feed is available 24 hrs per day.

4 - Some drinking water can be provided in the food trough to promote intake of all the food. But, **unrestricted fresh water must be available via a separate drinker.** Normally one drinker per 10 animals is sufficient, but some countries have stricter rules.



Typical example of free access stall dimensions

5 - Normally there is **variation in insemination dates** so it is advisable to move all the sows into the group pen some days before 4 weeks after service. This prevents late or early entry of some sows in another group. Indeed, single sows should never be introduced into an unfamiliar group because of the risk that they will be the focus of aggression.

6 - **Sows should have “a sufficient quantity of bulky or high-fibre food”**. This is often present in the form of ground fibres in the feed, but not as separate long fibres. Thus, most EU sows have no long fibre feed. On the other hand these “multi-purpose” fibres are available ad libitum in straw based systems. In other systems silage or hay could serve as bulky feed.

7 - **In Free Access Stalls sufficient space to perform social behaviour and to turn around** requires a minimum width of the area behind the stalls; in double rows this should be 3 m. Converting a system to group housing by simply opening the individual stalls and having only 1.5 m behind them may comply with the rules if not all stalls are occupied, but this will not improve welfare.

DETECTING NON-COMPLIANCE WITH WELFARE LEGISLATION

Most pig farmers will manage group housing systems well. But because of shortcomings (e.g. in pen size or ventilation system) or personal preferences a system may not always comply with the spirit of the law.

✓ Firstly, for example, whereas a 22.5 m² pen normally houses 10 sows it may also be used to hold 9 or 11 sows or a mixture of sows and gilts. Thus, slight overcrowding in some pens is sometimes thought to be compensated by “under occupancy” in others. The average stocking density at farm level is then correct, but at pen level it is not. Because of biological variation in insemination dates and group composition this could sometimes cause problems at the farm. **We recommend that the inspector should calculate the average stocking density in a number of pregnant sow pens.**

✓ Secondly, the rear gates of free access stalls may sometimes be kept locked because this results in less labour, cleaner pens and fewer aggressive interactions. These sows might only be released when an inspector visits the farm, but this practice can be detected if fresh wounds or dirty floors at the back of the stalls are seen (normally sows defecate outside the stalls). **Steps should be taken to ensure that sows should only be locked in for 30 min from the start of feeding.**

✓ Thirdly sows should be in a group from 4 weeks after service until 1 week before expected farrowing. Sows are normally without piglets for 120 days and can be kept individually for a maximum of 5 of the 16 weeks, i.e. 31% of the time they spend in the dry sow house. **If too many (> 40%) of the sows are in individual stalls this indicates that sows are being kept in stalls too long.** If a large proportion of the sows in the farrowing house have no piglets this needs close attention because it might indicate that sows are being moved to the farrowing house too early. Such a situation needs close attention and correction.



Free Access Stalls with wide area between two rows, but dirty/wet spots show that stalls are mostly closed

REFERENCES

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