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Preventing Pig Losses

By K. M. Hope, B.Sc. (Agric.), Agricultural Adviser.

One of the main sources of economic loss in the pig industry is the high degree of mortality in young pigs. A study of the four pig crop reports from December, 1951, to June, 1953, shows that no less than 22 per cent. of the average litter of 8.8 pigs in Western Australia were lost before reaching the weaner stage.

These losses represent a heavy impost on the industry which could be reduced considerably by sound management. Reduced losses would mean that more pigs could be marketed per sow per year and this output figure could be further increased by intensive selection of high-producing sows which farrow and rear more pigs in a year.

The losses of young pigs may be grouped under three headings:
1. Pigs born dead.
2. Pigs born alive but lost before weaning due to crushing (overlying), scours, malnutrition and other causes.
3. Pigs lost after weaning.

Pigs Born Dead

About one dead pig in every 20 pigs born can be regarded as a normal result of the reproductive physiology of the sow. As many as 20 to 30 ova may be fertilised, although only 7 to 14 pigs generally survive the full 16 weeks of the gestation period owing to the intense competition for the nutrients in the uterine blood supply.

To obtain good litters the boar should be healthy and vigorous and should receive the same high quality feed as the in-pig sow, but with the quantity fed daily cut down to 4 to 5 lb., so as to keep him in light working trim. A service on the first day of heat plus another service on the second day of heat is recommended. If the boar must be used sparingly a single service would best be given on the second day of heat. Sows should not be run with the boar for any length of time as he will take most of the feed, will become too heavy and may also cause pig losses by jostling in-pig sows.

Sound nutrition of the in-pig sow will minimise the number of pigs born dead.
and improve the total number of pigs born. A ration of 16 per cent. crude protein content is recommended for in-pig sows and the quantity fed daily (5 to 6 lb.) should be adjusted to keep the sows in good condition but not too heavy. The crushed grain ration for in-pig sows and boars could contain a large proportion of barley and oats as the extra bulk will keep them contented without making them over-fat.

In-pig sows use green grazing more efficiently than any other pigs, and this gives a saving of approximately half the protein supplement and half the grain ration. A sow on unlimited green grazing, plus 6 oz. meatmeal and 2½ lb. crushed grain per day, would do as well as a sow receiving 12 oz. meatmeal and 4½ lb. crushed grain with no grazing. In addition, the sows on good grazing would be in better “nick” with improved muscular tone.

Sudden changes in the feed should be avoided during pregnancy as the sow may go off her feed for several days when switched to a different ration, and the resulting competition between the developing embryos for the reduced supply of nutrients could result in smaller litters being born, more runts, or occasional dead pigs. A serious cause of dead pigs is slow farrowing and this may be due to several factors, some of which may be eliminated by improved management. Most of the still-born, well-developed piglets are in effect suffocated while being born as they are derived of the maternal blood supply for too long before the actual emergence when they can take in their own oxygen by breathing.

Still-born pigs may be caused by the following conditions, all of which may be prevented:—

1. Sow in too heavy condition. This may be prevented by raising the quality and reducing quantity of feed during pregnancy.

2. Old and gross sows. Preventive measures here consist of culling the sows after five litters, except for the unusually good sow that continues to farrow successfully and rear good litters.

3. Poor muscular tone of the uterus and allied muscles due to a ration deficient in proteins and vitamins. This may be prevented by improved feeding.

4. Constipation. To prevent this include 25 per cent. of bran in the ration of the sow during the week before farrowing.

PIGS BORN ALIVE BUT LOST BEFORE WEANING

Most of the losses under this heading are due to crushing (overlying) and this may be reduced by keeping the sows in good condition; culling sows before they become too heavy and clumsy; using a good farrowing pen, and controlling the sows’ rations during the first two days when the newly-born pigs are most vulnerable.

Sows should not be fed for 24 hours after farrowing although fresh clean water should be freely available. If the sow is fed soon after farrowing is completed, she is liable to become sluggish, clumsy and sleepy and is more liable to crush her pigs. On the second day after farrowing two light feeds of wet mash are recommended, following which the feed should be gradually increased to provide all that the sow can eat by the end of the first week.

A ration of 17 to 18 per cent. crude protein content is recommended for sows suckling a litter. This promotes an ample flow of milk with the minimum of loss in body weight of the sow over the eight weeks. A good guide for the daily feeding is 6 to 7 lb. for the sow herself plus a ¼ lb. per piglet being suckled; i.e., a sow with ten pigs would receive 11 to 12 lb. of feed daily. This quantity of feed would be reduced on the day before weaning so as to ease off the milk supply and prevent discomfort.

Losses by crushing are considerably reduced by the combined hover board and farrowing rail which is built 10 to 12 inches out from the wall and 8 to 10 inches up from the floor. The hover board provides a snug shelter which is out of the way of the sow and it is equally effective with either flat or sloping floors as the cosiness of the hover attracts the young pigs. Where there is an outside concrete pen, the exit from the wooden-floored farrowing pen should be blocked so as to avoid any losses from new-born piglets being chilled on the concrete.
Attention to sows at farrowing time pays good dividends in reduced pig losses. This is especially the case if a sow has become lame or unexpectedly clumsy in the last month of pregnancy. A well-designed farrowing crate can be of considerable assistance with such sows.

Farrowing pen hygiene is the first step in minimising losses from scours, worms and other disease conditions. The farrowing pen should be scrubbed out and disinfected before bringing a new sow, while the sow herself should be groomed down so that the newly born piglets will not suck worm eggs and disease producing organisms from the udder surface.

The sow and litter should be moved out from the farrowing pen to a paddock by the end of the first week. If they must remain in pens they should have only small paved yards for the sow and the space saved would be used to provide miniature paddocks for the litter only, at the back of the pen.

Losses of young pigs from malnutrition both before and after weaning will be minimised by creep feeding them from three to eight weeks with a dry meal mixture of 17 to 18 per cent. protein content. Dry meal is recommended as it can be always available without the souring or fermenting that would occur with wet feed.

Farmers who handle their sows on a bulk basis are advised to reduce losses from diseases by providing at least four paddocks of two to ten acres in area which can be rested in turn, preferably under some form of crop to use up the pig manure and freshen up the ground.

**LOSOSES AFTER WEANING**

The pig crop report for the spring of 1952 showed that 3.6 per cent. of pigs were lost after weaning. These losses could be considerably reduced by improved feeding, cleaner pens and cleaner paddocks.

Losses from castration could be practically eliminated if this operation is carried out hygienically before the pigs are six weeks old. If castration is carried out early and the piglets are creep fed from three to eight weeks, and then the litters are weaned by removing the sow from the piglets so that the young pigs are left in familiar surroundings, it should be possible to produce weaners weighing 35 lb. and over. Such pigs would not have received any setbacks and would grow well to porker weights at three to four months and baconer weights at six months.

Good feeding, with protein levels of 17 to 18 per cent. for weaners, 16 per cent. for slips and growers, 14 per cent. for porkers and 13 per cent. for baconers would give keen, healthy, actively-growing pigs which would be resistant to disease.

If pneumonia, paratyphoid or other diseases occur, prompt isolation and treatment will minimise losses.

When necessary, a routine dosage with sodium fluoride for control of roundworms would be best given about two weeks after weaning.