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R B. Richards

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PRACTICAL DISEASE PREVENTION IN THE PIG HERD

By R. B. RICHARDS, Veterinary Surgeon, Narrogin

DISEASES cause loss in pig production through mortality, poor growth rate and reduced food conversion efficiency. The cost of drugs and expert advice causes further economic loss, and the dangers to public health and to other livestock in a community are serious and often-neglected considerations.

Prevention of disease employs basic common-sense techniques. Some of the more important principles are outlined in this article.

Siting the piggery

A gentle slope should be selected to prevent water from gathering and producing wallows. Similarly, watering points should be sited so that the inevitable “splash” is allowed to run off.

The piggery should be some distance from existing buildings and a “no-through road” sign should be erected to discourage visitors and minimise traffic through the site.

Building construction

If a large number of animals are to be housed together, the basic aim should be to provide clean, warm, dry quarters. Cleanliness is of utmost importance and in this respect the removal of dung takes precedence. The principles involved here are to ensure that:

- Daily cleaning can be done quickly and efficiently.
- Feeding and dunging areas do not overlap.
- There is no pen-to-pen transfer of faeces.

Attention to the system of ventilation in the shed will eliminate unnecessary draughts and provide ample fresh air.

Watering points should be situated close to the dunging area and at such a height from the floor that faecal contamination is impossible.

Foundation stock

The purchase of initial breeding stock should be done with full knowledge of the possibility of introducing disease into the piggery. The cardinal rule is never purchase breeding stock through a sale-yard. If possible, stock should be bought from a virus pneumonia-free herd or a breeder whose reputation guarantees clean stock. Both stud and commercial breeders should be considered when selecting foundation stock.

Some attempt should be made to obtain as much information as possible regarding the disease history of the stock. Details of vaccination history, veterinary attention, nature and amount of drugs used and performance data will give the purchaser a guide to the disease prevention measures which must be adopted.

Although not a basic function of the Medina Pig Research Station, it is possible that at times, surplus breeders with minimal disease status may become available to farmers wishing to establish minimal disease herds from this source.

Maintenance of health

Good husbandry is the basis of all constructive disease prevention. Its main aim is to eliminate stress, and its ingredients can be described as follows.
NUTRITION—the most common means of placing stress on the animal is by faulty feeding. A well fed animal has a good chance of resisting the challenge of disease. This applies particularly to young pigs between birth and weaning, because this age group is more susceptible to disease than older animals. Nutritional diseases are very common, the most frequent being those due to lack or imbalance of vitamins and minerals. This is often overlooked when dealing with skin conditions which may disguise a primary dietary fault.

ENVIRONMENT—as mentioned above, a clean, dry, warm environment is an insurance against stress. Dirty conditions, where dung is allowed to accumulate, will promote the transmission of diseases which affect the stomach and intestines. Cold, wet and draughty conditions produce diseases of the respiratory system and contaminated feed and water may produce a variety of alimentary disorders. Old and dirty bedding encourages the proliferation of lice, mange and the development of skin ailments.

MANAGEMENT—such procedures as castration, teeth clipping, ear notching, iron injections and weaning are all stress-inducing activities and should be done with a maximum of care and consideration. Changes in ration composition should be made slowly and gradually. Generally handling of pigs should be carried out quietly and gently, and pens should not be overcrowded.

Active disease prevention

Certain separate measures may be taken for the sole purpose of disease prevention. Vaccination of breeding sows against the disease leptospirosis is a worthwhile policy even under the best conditions of nutrition, husbandry and management.

Leptospirosis is a highly infectious disease which causes abortions and stillbirths in breeding animals. It spreads rapidly through the piggery and its eradication is slow and expensive. Outbreaks in intensive piggeries have illustrated the ability of the organism to penetrate such man-made barriers of prevention as good hygiene and management. Vaccination is cheap insurance against such a potent killer.

Vaccination against erysepiias, using a reliable killed vaccine, is generally advisable. Although the acute form of erysepiias is relatively uncommon, chronic infection accounts for a significant amount of ill health, failure to thrive and arthritis in pigs. This disease is preventable and the good health programme in a piggery should include erysepiias vaccination.

Rats and mice are notorious carriers of disease and their presence in the piggery and feed storage facilities is a threat to animal health. Control of rodents should be given priority.

Isolation of the piggery from other domestic and wild stock is a further protective measure against the introduction of disease. Lice, mites, worm eggs, bacteria and viruses may be carried mechanically by all manner of living things. Buildings can be designed to make it impossible for birds to nest in any part of the piggery.

The transmission of disease by flies, mosquitoes and other insects has been well documented. Dung provides the single most attractive bait for flies and its removal or protection by adequate covering will solve much of the fly problem.

The prevention of disease by commonsense means is a logical step towards increased efficiency of pig production, and, as always, prevention is better (and cheaper) than cure.
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