

Report of Workshop 5: Demands on farm level

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Statements

1. Management requirements – the German situation and criteria for self-control (E. v. Borell)
2. Stockmanship and attitudes (C. Winckler)
3. Free farrowing – dangerous for farmers and vets (C. Leeb / B. Zehnder)

Discussion

How to make the change to free farrowing and what are the qualities of management and stockmanship?

How to make the change?

Different groups should be brought together to transfer knowledge and opinions. Especially farmers need to be reached. They can learn from each other and see how things work in practice, starting on a small scale. This can for instance be done by:

- Discuss current farrowing pens: let farmers take pictures and make movies in their stables. By experiencing together, more awareness will be created than with force.
- The system gives feedback, often farmers do not like to work in this old situation.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of these pens, which probably lead to finding more disadvantages of the old pens.
- Specialists from other field should be hired, for instance in innovation or marketing processes. The question “why” is very important in this. Different views from different fields make it easier to think out of the box.
- Motivation is more important than mind, so farmers should think about when they are satisfied.
- Not only emotions are important, but also the outcome. When a farmer “does well” by a better quality, this often leads to better results as well.

Other important stakeholders:

- Vets: vets should not be underestimated in the process, because farmers have trust in them. However, not all vets have enough knowledge about loose housing systems. Therefore, they should be educated in this.
- Scientists: scientists sometimes steer too much or come too often with improvement strategies when things are not working. However, social scientists may have a different view than animal scientists.
- Stable designers: transfer of knowledge can be important here. Further, by teaching them, they can also teach the farmers.

Development and encouragement

Many farmers do not know about issues like behavioural problems. Therefore, it is questioned how well farmers are educated and how awareness can be raised of such issues. On overall, the new generation is educated well. It is important to know what is important for them to know. Because of differences in education and experiences, courses of different levels should be developed when making teaching modules for farmers. Meetings to share knowledge can also be effective. Farmers should be involved in the process, otherwise they may feel overruled. Respect should be created between parties. The person who brings the message is important in this, as mentioned earlier.

The majority of the farmers want as much profit as possible. Economic factors are therefore an important motivation in deciding to change to loose housing farrowing systems. Loose housing is obligatory in organic farms. There is a market for this meat where consumers are willing to pay more for it. However, reasons to buy this are often other than animal welfare.

Besides, only a small number of farms can be converted because organic farming of all monogastric animals is not realistic with the high meat consumption nowadays. The benefits-cost data should therefore be made clear. Instead of “does it cost more”, it is more important to think about how to make the system cheaper. Most farmers do not want an increase in welfare without an increase in production.

For a successful method for loose housing sows, data of success factors are needed. Now there are too many openings, therefore it is essential to look at success stories which factors are truly important. Factors can be amongst others less stillborns and a higher weaning weight. Clear benefits of the systems are still not well proven. For instance straw can be seen as a success factor due to the opportunity to perform nest building behaviour, but also brings in extra work, costs and concerns of contamination.

Further, it is important to all work by the same rules, which workers have to follow. On the other side, protocols need to offer the opportunity to be made farm-specific at the same time. Each farm has its own characteristics and procedures, depending on different factors. For instance, smaller farms allow better contact with the sows, while large farms often have better protocols. Where more scientific work is needed, needs to be made clear.

Final remarks

Stockmanship is of crucial importance, in which new skills are important to let them pay attention to what the sow is doing. A change in attitude is needed, for instance sows should more be seen as animals instead of production materials. Other stakeholders should be educated in this as well.

It needs to become clear which changes are needed to make free farrowing be more attractive to use. When this is known, a well-thought education program should be made. Education protocols of good quality are vital for this goal. With funds of the European Union, one good-quality program should be developed. In this program, awareness about animal welfare should be created on all levels. Not only for farmers but also for amongst others citizens and other stakeholders.

Summarizing sheet

Stockmanship = key factor

- Management protocols, farm-specific
- Safety aspects
- Quality + quantity of labour
- Motivation, attitude, observational skills

Improvement, development

Education:

- Teaching the teachers
- Problem awareness for farmers
- Choice of teachers
- Teaching materials (e.g. movies, pictures)
- Farmers teaching farmers (e.g. excursions)
- Demonstrating economic success
- Exchange between countries/stakeholders*

Encouragement:

- Success factors*
- Economic benefits*
- Star system

* knowledge gap