

Report on Workshop 6: Transition process

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Introduction

The guiding idea of this workshop was to define obstacles and reasons that hinder the realization of free farrowing systems first. In a second step, possible solutions and means to overcome those obstacles were discussed. In order to build up on the knowledge gained in different countries, the Swedish, the Danish and the Swiss situation were presented at the beginning of the workshop.

Statements (5-7 minutes)

1. The Swedish model (Boe Algers)
2. The Danish model (Vivi Arestrup-Moustsen)
3. The Swiss model (Roland Weber)

Discussion on the transition process (25 minutes)

Experience from the Swedish transition process to free farrowing systems shows that the first few farmers who try out new systems are usually dedicated people who know that they have to invest a lot - not only money but also a lot of thinking and creativeness. It is always this type of pioneer who makes a new system run. Thus the results of a new system are good in the first period. After this initial period many farmers have problems within the new system. They always look for new options, trying to be good farmers but they perform very poor. All of the sudden the output of the new system is very poor. A new system can only survive if it goes over that critical second period when many farmers invest and try out. At that time the robustness of a new system can be evaluated seriously. What was also found is that some farmers are more vocal and better in communication and knowledge transfer than the others. In the transition process of a new system it is very important to make sure that the first farmers who really know how to run the system are those who communicate and disseminate knowledge and not those who have problems with the system. The period, when those who cannot manage the new system are very vocal has to be survived. In the transition process you have to make sure that the good farmers disseminate the knowledge and experience.

The UK situation

The transition process in the UK is voluntary. But farmers who want to sell their pigs in the UK have to consider the power of the market. There is huge pressure from animal welfare organisations which does not primarily intend to eradicate farrowing crates by law but it forces retailers to make changes. What has particularly made a difference in the UK is the Freedom Food scheme which is run by the bigger animal welfare organisation. At the beginning all members were outdoor pig farmers. In a compromise they allowed indoor farmers in the scheme if they crated the sows for not more than five days. At the beginning of 2011 they changed their policy to 'no farrowing crates at all!' The big switch has been that one big retailer decided to only source from the Freedom Food label. And suddenly a lot more of indoor farmers without farrowing crate are needed and they are not there. The retailer offers a premium (~5 cents a kilo) and some market security, which is a bigger thing for farmers. So suddenly there are a lot of individual farmers and marketing chains who are starting to ask: could we change to loose farrowing systems? Farmers are growing nervous but they also are looking for possibilities. The government also wants to support this process and has announced to give a little bit of subsidy for building loose systems. And this makes quite a difference. Last year a lot of farmers said: we would like to try up this system but it is too expensive. We need money to cover the difference in the investment costs between building with farrowing crates and building with loose farrowing systems. Last year there was no money but perhaps now they get one. People will try out a few pens maybe in one room and looking at the success of these people we could see if pig chain changes quite quickly or a complete stop.

The importance of consumers and retailers

The consumer behaviour is changing in Austria too. Consumers are conscious about the origin and the kind of production of fresh meat. But this market is decreasing because of an increasing number of single households and its demand for prefinished products. On the other hand the market for restaurants, hotels, large kitchens and food industry is growing. And these buyers seem to care just for price and stability. In Sweden the problem with large kitchens is more or less the same. But the buyers do care about quality but they don't see how to make specifications according to the EU-regulations. And they do have an interest in buying quality food with high animal welfare standards. A major problem is that the EU does not regulate the declaration of the origin of the constituents of prepared products and sausages (which is the case in fresh meat). Retailers are not keen to make a welfare label on their products. Different retailers have their own labelling and the consumers may be confused. So a huge challenge from the food industry towards more transparency cannot be expected. On the other hand these companies are part of a corporate social responsibility. The self-image a retailer wants to have is becoming more important. They don't want to have any embarrassment on animal welfare issues. Most consumers do not understand much about a certain label but they give the responsibility to the retailers.

Even when a retailer gets more money for a better welfare product it is not certain that the farmer who invested in better housing gets more money. It is dangerous to expect more money coming from the consumers and that it ends in the farmer's pocket after having passed the retailers and the slaughter houses. The history tells us that the first farmers who do new things get some significant premium. But when enough farmers do it the premium disappears. Experience from Sweden shows that only a few farmers earn some extra money but most of it ends by the retailers. Some Swedish retailers pay a premium to the farmers because they believe that the delivery could be a problem in the long run if they knock them out. Maybe it is the character of economy to keep the farmer starving as much as they could. In conclusion extra money for a higher animal welfare standard is considered as a nice additional advantage but pig industry should mainly focus on making higher welfare systems more competitive, to make it work in the conventional market and not only in niche markets.

Communication and dissemination

Communication is an important issue in the transition process. Especially farmers should be taken into charge. The information on new systems and regulations has to be communicated within agriculture and to the public. Most farmers have been educated with cages and this system was developed to a high productivity. It must be the aim of scientists and animal welfare organisations to give the farmers adequate proposals. Farmers (and vets) are prepared for a change but time is needed to get their minds set for the change and to utilise their creativity. We need the message spread that it will change towards free farrowing and it will be soon! This message should wake up the creativity of the farmers. The general attitude of the communication has to be positive and constructive. The Austrian public debate on a ban of farrowing crates was mainly a political battle with a lot of incorrect information and negative emotions on the one hand and a dramatic lack of serious communication between experts and to the farmers on the other hand. This situation resulted in scared Austrian farmers with limited interest to switch to a new system. Additionally the farmers were threatened by a transition period of only 4 years. That does not work if we want them to be constructive and supportive. There should be an adequate transition period to develop new competitive systems and to change minds. If there is uncertainty the farmers will oppose.

Is everything solved on scientific level?

Is this the case in crated systems? There will ever be problems to be solved and there will not be the only way out. We should better ask: is it possible to switch to free farrowing systems? Instead of saying this is the right system or that one. We should support those few farmers who want to make a try and support them in the very best way and then listen to them and broadcast their message. There are scientifically well documented principles how to develop a good free farrowing pen. We know these elements that should be working from small scale experiments. But we are still missing a kind of robustness of loose farrowing

systems. We need information on free farrowing systems at different farm levels (large scale farms) and at different management procedures.

The robustness of a housing system is dependent from the degree it obeys the nature of the animals. According to Francis Bacon "Nature must be obeyed to be controlled". The more the biology of the animals is obeyed the fewer problems (health, behaviour, productivity) you will have. Thus we appropriate technical and management solutions should be applied to make sure that biology works in an optimal way. As we live in a non-ideal world the biological needs of the animal cannot be fulfilled in an optimal way. Thus we need compromises and we have to be aware of the consequence of these compromises before we continue. The variation of the animals has also to be taken into account too, there is no average animal!

How long will it take for scientist to come out with robust systems?

This question is hard to answer without large scale farms to test it. If the test farms are there and if you have good and interested farmers who dare tomorrow, who do their very best, you will be able to evaluate these farms in two years minimum. If there are no farms a preparation period of one to three years prior to the evaluation period is needed to convince farmers and to plan. So five years in total are needed to get reliable results and to develop robust systems. After this time you can start to switch to the new systems with as transition period that is orientated on the investment cycle of the buildings. Scientists have to assist and support the process and to interact with the farmers. Scientists are necessary for developing and evaluation of systems. In cooperation with the farmers the scientists have to define which system is working. At the end it will be defined by the most productive farmer.

Adequate educational programs needed

It is certain that the transition process has to be accompanied by adequate educational programmes. As a result of an investigation on the new Swedish Animal Welfare act (see web page of Swedish government) it has been concluded that anyone who has animal in his/her care and have economic interest in it should have appropriate competence and education. With the DG SANCO program "Everyone is responsible" the EU wants to stimulate awareness and knowledge on animal welfare for all EU citizens (see http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/welfare/docs/aw_newsletter_01_June2010_en.pdf). There is obviously a need for educational material on animal welfare. It should promote awareness on animal welfare from pupil to slaughter man. The essential values for each species and each situation must be defined properly and there must be peer reviewed quality assurance programme. It is crucial to disseminate this information in a modern way (i.e. e-learning). EU-money should be spent on that quality certified education program.

In Norway the pig breeder association offers an educational program for pig farmers (modules for pig production, fattening and economy. Skills on animal welfare, management and production are trained. This kind of programs should be mandatory in the EU. That would improve the image of farmers who are housing animals.

Education on animal welfare is important for the veterinarians too. Most vet students are very enthusiastic on animal welfare. But when vets start to work in praxis and facing to the economic situation they change priorities and attitudes about animal welfare quickly. Another problem arises from the fact that herd sizes become bigger and housing of animals becomes more challenging. But the education programmes do not change as quickly as necessary.

Summary

It is concluded that the transition from crates to free farrowing systems will be a very complex, challenging and long lasting process. The main transition, however, has to take place in the mind set of farmers, vets, advisers, building companies and consumers. At the end it has to result in a new balance between sows, piglets, farmers and society. Scientist should support and assist this process and not just to tell people involved what is right or wrong. The main responsibility of scientist is to provide and disseminate serious information.