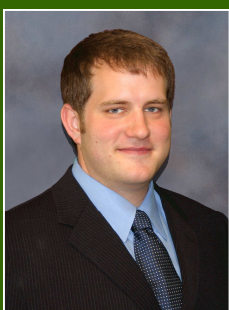


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"Pig Care: A Little TLC Goes A Long Way"

Dr. Seth A. Krantz
Carthage Veterinary
Service, Ltd.



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Carthage Veterinary
Service, Ltd.
PO Box 220
Carthage, IL 62321
217-357-2811
www.hogvet.com

Pig Care: A Little TLC Goes A Long Way

In the highly specialized and technological world of pig production, it is often easy to lose track of the basics. Often, the basic things that we take for granted can have huge impacts on pig health, well-being, and production. Providing good pig care is certainly one of these things. To start, I think we need to define exactly what pig care means. I Googled the definition of the word care and came up with several definitions which are applicable. Among them; close attention, painstaking application, watchful oversight, and providing needed assistance stood out. All help define the actions required by us to provide good pig care. Pig care is a critical component to all management systems whether you are involved in breed-to-wean, farrow-to-finish, or wean-to-finish production. For this discussion, I will be focusing on the wean-to-finish aspect of the industry, primarily in regards to starting pigs so they are set up for success.

Starting pigs should be a major focus for your farm. When pigs arrive at the nursery or wean-to-finish barn, it is important to consider the significant stressors that those pigs have been exposed to during the weaning process. Major disruptions in social order, changes in environment and temperature, a shift in diet, and transport for several hours stresses pigs. These things can leave them dehydrated, immune-compromised, and susceptible to health challenges. To counteract these challenges, you should implement procedures related to the non-negotiables of good pig care. These non-negotiables include environment, feed, water, and care for compromised pigs.

A basic set of guidelines for managing the environment is provided, but adjustments should be made based on animal observations. Pigs should lie touching each other, but not piled. Piling indicates that pigs are chilled and

proper adjustments to ventilation should be made. Barn temperature should be set on a curve, starting at 82 degrees when weaned pigs arrive, decreasing 2 degrees per week until 14 weeks placed. Relative humidity should be 50-70%. Barns that are too humid can set pigs up to develop respiratory infections. Always ensure that fans are clean and that there are no holes or gaps in curtains. These things reduce the efficiency of your ventilation system and can chill pigs.

Getting pigs to eat is critical to a good start. Mat feeding should be implemented regardless of whether you utilize a nursery or start pigs in a wean-to-finish barn. Mat feeding mimics the normal nursing behavior of pigs in which the sow vocalizes to signal the pigs to eat. Placing feed on mats multiple times a day continues that signaling until pigs have started eating well. Target 1 lb. of starter ration per 30 pigs for each feeding to minimize feed wastage. You can consider using gruel feed especially in fallback pens. There are several commercial products available or starter feed can be mixed with water, gradually reducing the proportion of water. Because pigs need adequate water to encourage feed consumption and because they will likely have some degree of dehydration after their long truck ride, facilitating water consumption is paramount. To help pigs find the water source, nipples can be loosened so they drip or plugged open for the first day when pigs arrive.

The final critical component of good pig care is identifying and taking action for compromised pigs. When observing pigs, I use the motto; every barn, every pig, every day. All pigs should get up and be observed in motion when walking pigs. Look for pigs that are just starting to fall back seen as sunken abdomens and pigs that are slower than their pen mates. Taking action for these pigs and



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Pig Care: A Little TLC Goes A Long Way

treating according to the specific farm program designed by your veterinarian will result in a high likelihood of treatment success. Health challenges in the sow herd from which your pigs are sourced can increase the number of animals that may need individual treatment. Have a good working relationship with your veterinarian and notify them as soon as you notice a shift in the health status of your herd. As with individual treatment, early action on a herd level is also necessary to achieve success. When a compromised animal is identified, it is a good practice to have hospital space available so those pigs can have a recovery area where competition is lessened. Always ensure that 5-10% of the pen space in a barn is left open for a hospital area. Lastly, although unpleasant, timely euthanasia is essential to providing good care. Euthanasia is necessary to prevent further suffering of debilitated animals. Animals to be selected for euthanasia are those that do not recover after two days of intensive care, animals that have a very poor body condition, and those that are non-ambulatory. Only use approved, humane methods of euthanasia.

Always remember to go back to the basics and spend a little more time with your pigs to get them off to a great start. From the moment pigs arrive at your farm, you should set them up for success. Remember, a little TLC goes a long way.

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