Management

by Stuart Lumb

Some aspects of piglet mortality

One of the most satisfying moments that a pig producer can witness is the sight of a healthy new born litter of pink piglets, fast asleep alongside their mother, content with full stomachs of milk.

Sadly the next morning inevitably one or two of those self same piglets, often the biggest, are found cold and dead at the back of sow. In the UK pre-weaning losses have not changed significantly over the last seven years, ranging between 11.4 and 10.3% (BPEX/MLC 2004 Yearbook).

The farrowing crate, or piglet protector, is still the best device around in relation to minimising overlaying. The welfare lobby would like to ban piglet protectors, claiming that it is cruel to confine a sow for three or four weeks. What about the poor piglets though? Certainly in the UK the sow spends the bulk of her time loose housed, so if a relatively short period of confinement results in preserving her piglets' life then, on balance, a period of restraint should be acceptable.

Outdoor pig production probably accounts for around 30% of UK output and numbers reared per sow are good, all things considered. The genetic make up of the sow is undoubtedly a contributory factor – some breeds and crosses have better mothering ability than others – but indoor producers do not always want those self same lines.

Some breeding companies use litter size as a major selling point. Is it better for a sow to farrow 14 piglets, lose three and rear 11 or have a strain that farrows fewer piglets, say 11, but rears them all?

In Denmark the Danbred dams are very prolific, such that breeders there are now selecting replacements on the basis of mothering ability defined as the number of pigs alive at five days post-farrowing.

It is essential to have staff on hand at farrowing to assist sows if need be and to help piglets find a teat in order to get that first suckle of immunoglobulin-containing colostrum, vital to protect the piglet against disease. With a swing to batch farrowing in many countries staff can be concentrated in the farrowing house, which is a definite bonus.

On many large facilities farrowing units are staffed 24 hours a day. The additional cost though, has to be put against the extra output to determine if the practice is cost effective.

Induced farrowing has been common for many years in order to reduce the spread of farrowings and to get maximum benefit from farrowing house staff.

The technique is not without problems – dates have to be checked carefully as if sows are induced too soon then piglets can be born premature and weak, defeating the whole object of the exercise.

Having many sows farrowing together allows litters to be evened up through cross fostering, helping increase survival rates.

Also, remember that women should not handle prostaglandins.

As far as design of the piglet protector/farrowing crate is concerned, finger bars to reduce overlaying are still a preferred feature with many manufacturers.

Nooyens, the Dutch equipment manufacturer, currently feature the 'balance pen' in their product range. The protector/crate sits in the middle of two side creeps.

When the sow lies down she activates a pressure pad which causes the creep areas to rise so that they are in line with the sow's udder allowing suckling.

When the sow stands up the pressure is released and so the creep areas – plus piglets – are lowered 20cm out of harm's way and, hence, overlaying is drastically reduced.

A large Irish unit recently installed a number of the balance pens and reports indicate that the the extra costs of the balance concept were paid for by improved productivity.

Some method of keeping the piglet well away from the sow – apart from when suckling – is still essential.

There are many types of heat pad on the market made of different materials and using different forms of energy for heating.

Many heat pads are built into the farrowing pen floor although moveable pads are also an option.

Some producers find a heat pad by itself is quite sufficient, whereas others still prefer the traditional pig lamp.

Once farrowing has finished the piglets should be checked over and the navel cord treated with antiseptic spray or by dipping the navel into a small container of iodine.

The wet cord is an ideal route for infection to get into the piglet, hence, the need for this treatment. Untreated navels can lead to joint ill developing, with piglets then having trouble suckling through lack of mobility.

If not treated with antibiotics death can result through starvation. Joint problems can be made worse by poor floors. Many units in the UK have part solid concrete floors which over the years become rough due to age and over zealous power washing.

There are several powdered products on the market which will aid piglet comfort. Generally these products are highly absorbent and hence will also keep the pen floor and creep area dry.

Dry floors are essential at farrowing as piglets lying in damp conditions can get chilled which can then make them more likely to pick up disease. Diarrhoea/scours can be a major cause of piglet mortality.

This may be due to E. coli and a sow and gilt vaccination programme should be considered using a proprietary vaccine.

Naturally farrowing pens should be disinfected and rested between farrowings to counter a build up of disease.

Also remember that it is vital that piglets get a good intake of colostrum with its essential 'protection package'. Colostrum substitutes may be worth using too.

Reducing pre-weaning losses has to be one of the most rewarding jobs on a pig unit. In addition, the financial advantages are a big bonus! n

The balance pen (Glen of Aherlow Co-op, Eire).

The balance pen with the creep area lowered.