Management

by Stuart Lumb

Sow longevity

In years gone by the majority of pig farmers could recognise their sows individually and would care for them individually. Today, as unit sizes grow, sows are just a number on a computer print out, although many pedigree breeders are still small enough to recognise their sows individually.

Like it or not, sows are pig producing machines and if they fail in that function then they soon end up in the slaughter house.

It is quite an expensive operation to produce a breeding gilt – or to buy one in – and naturally that cost should be spread over as long a period as possible. Having to cull females after their first litter due to an inability to re-breed is a very expensive operation, but it is does happen.

Ideally, that cost should be spread over six or seven litters. Generally, sows are most productive at around their fourth or fifth litter, but sadly many never survive in the herd that long. Thirty years ago five week weaning was the norm in the UK and sows would produce just over two litters a year. Then two week weaning became the fashion, followed by three and four week weaning.

Ironically, the Danes are now looking at five week weaning again – as the system produces a bigger piglet at weaning plus it can be fed a cheaper diet.

Undoubtedly, earlier weaning puts the sow under more pressure which can lead to earlier culling. Generally sows are culled after the sixth or seventh litter.

Decline in performance

Performance starts to suffer as the sow gets older, but how many sows actually survive that long in the herd to produce that seventh parity? Not that many years ago a rule of thumb was that you culled one third of your sows each year.

Nowadays around 40% is the norm with 50% not being unknown. Certainly sow mortality has increased of late in the UK herd. A figure of 2% used to be the norm – now it is double that.

Much of this relates to the tightening up of welfare. A few years ago lame sows would be shipped off to the abattoir. The farmer would get a payment for the carcase, but at the expense of the sow suffering in transit.

Dry sows in Denmark.

Today, because of legal implications the producer will have those sows shot on the farm and what would have appeared in the records as a sale now appears as a death.

Sow stalls have been banned for some years now in the UK. This means that pregnant sows are group housed and some fighting generally occurs when the sows are mixed. This in itself can lead in extreme cases to death, although generally speaking group housing means that sows are more active and hence leg problems should be less compared to when sow stalls were the norm.

The old adage 'a leg at each corner' has never been more relevant. A replacement gilt needs strong solid legs to carry her throughout her life – think of the weight that each leg of a mature in-pig sow has to bear.

Fine boned animals are no good for today's intensive conditions.

A recent Danish survey involving over 14,000 sows makes interesting reading.

Reasons for culling were as follows:

- Reproductive problems 61%.
- Age 31%.
- Leg problems 9%.

A further breakdown of data showed that 48% of leg problems were specifically due to lesions in the elbow joint. Females with leg problems were relatively young and had poor body condition. Also 28% of the sows had stomach ulcers.

Examination of the reproductive and urinary systems indicated that 15% of the sows had cystitis, plus many of which had fully cystic ovaries resulting in permanent infertility.

Of the sows put down on the farm (10% of surveyed sows) 37% had chronic and acute arthritis and 16% had bone inflammation.

The survey also showed that 11% of sows were found dead on the farm. Of these, 23% died at farrowing and around 25% had twisted guts. Stomach ulcers were also found in many of the sows that had died.

The survey data makes interesting reading – once the detailed reasons for culling are known then it is possible for the producer to start doing something about it.

Unfortunately, it is often impractical for abattoir staff to carry out post mortem examinations on sows but even so producers should record data such as the age at culling, stage of the cycle, suspected reason for culling, parity number, cause of death re fatalities and so forth.

Database analysis

Once a database has been established then it is possible to see where the problem areas are – it could be that there is an infertility problem in the herd if a large number of sows have been culled due to failure to stay in pig.

Is there a seasonal effect? Again, this could be related to infertility.

A good system of pregnancy diagnosis is a key management aid in this context. Is lameness associated with a type of flooring in certain pens? Are complicated farrowings related to a certain type of farrowing pen/piglet protector design or size?

Over time a pattern will emerge and then it will be possible to look at trends and try and rectify the causes. The key is to have the data in the first place. It all takes time – something busy pig technicians never have enough of – but recording data in the first place is cost effective providing that the data is then analysed and the findings acted on.

Certainly sows are not living as long as they should be and any method of increasing longevity has to be a step in the right direction. ■

Reference

- Danish National Committee for Pig Production Report 2004.