



## National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee

14 March 2016

Hon Nathan Guy  
Minister for Primary Industries  
Parliament Buildings  
WELLINGTON

Dear Nathan

### **NAWAC review of the use of Farrowing Crates for Pigs in New Zealand**

#### **Recommendations**

- NAWAC's preliminary research showed no significant change in science, technology or good practice from 2010 when the pigs code of welfare was issued. NAWAC therefore considers that no formal review of the pigs code of welfare is necessary.
- NAWAC recommends that the existing minimum standard in the Pigs Code of Welfare remains in place.
- The minimum standard around the length of the farrowing crate should be considered by the regulations working group for lifting into regulations to provide clarity that the sow must not touch both the front and back of the farrowing crate simultaneously and to improve compliance.
- Compliance action is taken to ensure that industry is meeting the minimum standards as stated in the current code. NAWAC is pleased to note MPI's intention to inspect all New Zealand's large production pig farms over the next three years.
- NZPork is encouraged to work towards alternatives itself, with support from MPI and others, potentially working towards a shorter time in crates, replacement of crates, and addressing current problems with outdoor systems.
- Industry should be encouraged to improve piglet survival through breeding for non-crushing sows, breeding for good physiological sows and breeding more robust piglets (switching the focus from the current focus of breeding an increasing number of piglets to breeding fewer, but more robust piglets).

#### **Background**

In August 2014, you asked NAWAC to "assess whether or not there needs to be an amendment to the Pigs Code of Welfare (2010) and whether there are suitable options and

alternatives to the use of farrowing crates". You also sought advice on the use of older style farrowing crates, compared to modern farrowing crates; the time the sow should be in the farrowing crate and advice on other animal welfare considerations of relevance. You also asked NAWAC to consider if a date should be set for banning older style farrowing crates and, if so, what transitional dates would be required.

NAWAC formed a subcommittee to address this request. The subcommittee have visited a number of indoor (which is 60% of the industry) and outdoor (40% of the industry) pig farms using different farrowing systems and have held extensive discussions and deliberations around this request, reviewed the most recent international developments and worked with NZPork to progress this work programme.

At the current time, the code of welfare for pigs allows sows to be held in farrowing crates for 4 weeks postpartum to order to protect the piglets during the sow's lactation. They may also be confined for up to five days prior to farrowing.

NAWAC's considerations:

- *Are there suitable options and alternatives to the use of farrowing crates?*  
The Committee agrees that for indoor housing, there are no suitable alternatives to the use of farrowing crates that provide the same welfare benefits to the piglets and maintain the same levels of productivity as farrowing systems currently in use. There are a range of alternatives that provide a varying degree of improved sow welfare but all result in higher piglet mortality through injury, hypothermia, starvation or disease. Outdoor farrowing huts provide the best sow welfare but the worst piglet welfare so requiring all indoor piggeries to convert to outdoor systems is not a solution. Aside from practicability issues of land access and allocation, management of the effects of climate and resource management consents, current outdoor systems do not provide significant overall welfare gains.

The use of farrowing pens as an alternative for farrowing sows was considered by the Committee. Farrowing pens have been used both in a research setting and commercially and consist of a larger pen containing a crate. The sow is crated prior to farrowing and for the first week to ten days after farrowing, which is a time when her piglets are small and more susceptible to starvation, chilling or crushing by the sow. After this period, the sow is then released into the larger pen where she is able to move around and interact with her piglets until they are weaned at 28 days of age. However, the levels of piglet mortality in farrowing pens is higher than in farrowing crates.

On the question of length of time in farrowing crates, there has been some exploration in commercial settings and research settings on weaning the piglets at a younger age (e.g. at an average of three weeks of age, rather than four). This has the effect of shortening the amount of time that the sows spend in crates and means that there is no need for installing new infrastructure to accommodate sows and piglets together. Instead, the newly weaned piglets are removed to growing accommodation and sows are brought back into breeding accommodation. This system needs careful management and early weaning

can also cause additional problems for the sow (disturbances in the sow's reproductive cycle) and piglets (ill-thrift and failure to grow adequately).

- *What are the economic effects of moving away from farrowing crates?*

Nimmo Bell was contracted to perform an economic analysis to assess the economic impact of New Zealand moving away from the sow being confined for 4 weeks in a farrowing crate. The economic effect at both the farm and industry level was assessed for:

- Sow held in crate for one week (involving the use of farrowing pens)
- Sow held in crate for 3 weeks (three week weaning of piglets)

The economic analysis showed that enforcing a move to a one week farrowing pen system using new buildings was financially unviable. The cost to retrofit the infrastructure from farrowing crates to farrowing pens in existing buildings was also substantial and would be highly unprofitable with industry rationalisation a likely outcome. The three week system had a smaller potential negative financial impact than the one week system. When modelled, the economic effect of moving the industry to a three week system resulted in a range of outcomes, with steep losses on some farms and modest profits on others depending on their post-weaning management skills. However, enforcing this system industry-wide would require an increase in the number of nurse sows above the current 5% level. Internationally, moves are being made to increase, rather than decrease, the age of piglets when weaned to ensure their viability and welfare.

- *Does there need to be an amendment to the Pigs Code of Welfare?*

The Committee considers that the use of farrowing crates for the limited period of five days prior to farrowing and four weeks afterwards should be retained. Although NAWAC believes that the confining of sows in farrowing crates for this length of time does not provide for every behavioural need of sows, their use provides the best welfare outcome for the welfare needs of piglets and the best total welfare of piglets and sows, based on currently available farrowing practices and scientific knowledge and as appropriate to the environment and circumstances of the animals. At this time, the minimum standard in the current code is the minimum necessary to ensure that the purposes of the Act are met. NAWAC does not consider that there is any practical alternative system that provides comparable levels of piglet welfare while better meeting the welfare needs of sows.

NAWAC therefore recommends that the minimum standard should remain in place.

- *Can NAWAC provide advice on the use of older style farrowing crates?*

Older crates are often too small to accommodate today's large sows. Modern crates are also likely to be made of materials that are less likely to cause injury to the sows. The current minimum standard 10 (c) in the pigs' code is intended to ensure that the sow does not touch both sides of the crate simultaneously, but it does not address the length of the crates, and this should be clarified. This minimum standard should be considered by the regulations working group for lifting into regulations to provide clarity about the use of farrowing crates and to improve compliance.

- *Is industry meeting the requirements as set out in the Code of Welfare?*  
NAWAC has identified compliance issues with the following minimum standards currently contained within the code of welfare for pigs:
  - The current code of welfare allows for up to 5% of sows to be retained in crates for a further week (following the 4 week maximum in crates post-farrowing) as nurse sows. This practice enables slowly growing or poorly performing piglets to be properly weaned. It has been noted that industry does not accept or comply with this requirement and some producers are exceeding both the maximum 5% of sows allowed to be retained for this purpose and the amount of time that they are being retained (i.e. greater than the one week maximum as stated in the code).
  - The current code requires that sows in any farrowing system constructed after 3 December 2010, must be provided with material that can be manipulated until farrowing (to allow the sow to perform nesting behaviour which she is extremely motivated to do). It has been noted by NAWAC during this review that industry disagrees with this requirement and does not comply with this minimum standard.

It is anticipated that MPI compliance action will be taken to monitor these two aspects of the code during their upcoming inspection of all New Zealand's production pig farms. NAWAC understands that as part of this inspection MPI will check that producers are not using sow stalls following the minimum standard in the Pig Code preventing their use came into effect on the 3 December 2015.

*What other steps can be taken to improve the welfare of the sow in future?*

The position with regard to farrowing crates will need to be kept under review, until improved feasible alternatives emerge. While waiting for science to advance alternatives to the use of farrowing crates, NZPork is encouraged to look for innovative solutions and work towards alternatives itself, with support from MPI and others, including working towards a shorter time in crates, replacement of crates, and addressing current problems with outdoor systems.

To reduce the need for farrowing crates into the future, NAWAC believes that the industry should work to improve piglet survival through:

- Breeding for non-crushing sows (who spend more time making nose-to-nose contact with their piglets before lying down and react more quickly to piglet distress calls),
- Breeding for good physiological sows (optimal uterine environment, maternal behaviour, lactational output),
- Breeding more robust piglets that are less susceptible to being crushed (switching the focus from the current focus of breeding an increasing number of piglets to breeding fewer, but more robust piglets).

NAWAC is also aware that MPI is supporting research that aims to identify best practice in outdoor farrowing systems and will look forward to the completion of this research. The outline and latest milestone of this research is attached for your awareness.

Possible measures that MPI might take to improve compliance with the code of welfare include through the proposed proactive inspection of all large production pig farms by MPI and through the *Safeguarding our Animals, Safeguarding our Reputation* programme.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'John Hellström', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

John Hellström  
Chair, NAWAC