Viva!

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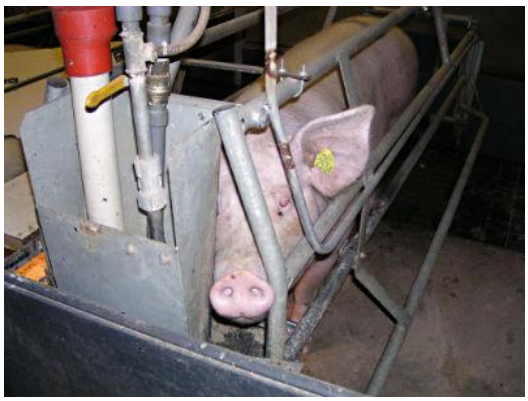
THE FARROWING CRATE

Updated 2011

The farrowing crate is a small metal cage in which pregnant sows are imprisoned for weeks on end, usually from a week before giving birth until their piglets are weaned three to four weeks later. She will be subjected to this roughly twice a year. The metal frame of the crate is just centimetres bigger than the sow's body and severely restricts her movements. She is completely unable to turn around, can scarcely take a step forward or backward and frequently rubs against the bars when standing up and lying down. Beside her cage is a "creep" area – usually around 50-100cm x 2m in size – for her piglets. The flooring is hard concrete and some form of heating, either mats or more commonly heatlamps, is used as a substitute for the warmth of their mother's body. The piglets are free to reach the sow's teats to suckle but she is prevented from moving close to them and cleaning them by the bars of the cage.



The farrowing crate is one of factory farming's hidden horrors – and one that most British sows are still subjected to twice a year

When not in the crate, sows used for breeding are kept separate from those used for meat, most commonly in concrete pens. Sows have a pregnancy lasting around four months and are usually reimpregnated within a week of their piglets being weaned, approximately a month after they were born. This means they are forced into the farrowing crate for 28-35 days every five months until, usually at around five years old (or often earlier), they are no longer commercially productive and are sent for slaughter.

The farrowing crate violates at least one of the Five Freedoms (freedom to express normal behaviour). Animal welfare experts also believe it "threatens" two other Freedoms (freedom from discomfort and freedom from fear and distress) (CABI 2010).

Sometimes there is confusion between the sow stall (which was banned in Britain in 1999) and the farrowing crate. The only real difference between a sow stall and a farrowing crate is that a sow is kept in the sow stall for longer (throughout her entire pregnancy). Welfare issues are more-or-less identical between stalls and crates, but the crate is still used for most sows in this country: 74 per cent (BPEX 2008) of the 427,000 breeding sows in Britain (BPEX, 2011).

A sow's life will be cut short at a relatively young age, despite a natural lifespan of around 20 years. On average, nearly 50 per cent of sows are replaced each year with many headed to the slaughterhouse for low grade meat products. In 2010, 218,000 sows were slaughtered (BPEX, Pig Yearbook 2011). Sow mortality (unnatural death or slaughter) and replacement rates are marginally lower on outdoor farms (BPEX, 2011).

In June 2010 there were 4,460,000 pigs alive in Britain (BPEX, 2011). Around 9.7 million pigs were slaughtered in the UK in 2010; the highest number since 2002 (BPEX, 2011). Pigs killed for meat are slaughtered at around just 6 months old.

Whilst there are a growing number of outdoor systems, there simply isn't the space in the UK for all pig farming to take place outside. Only a quarter of sows give birth outside, but only around 1 per cent of pigs killed for meat spend their whole lives outside as most are moved into indoor units after weaning (Structure of the UK Pig Industry, Assured British Pigs, 2008).

UNNATURAL BEHAVIOUR

The constraint of the farrowing crate prevents the sow from fulfilling any of her natural maternal instincts. Studies of wild or semi-wild pigs show that sows actually become *more* active before giving birth, often walking many kilometres to find a suitable nest site (Cronin *et al*, 1995; Biensen *et al*, 1996). They would naturally seek out a site in a covered area which is isolated from the rest of the herd (Jarvis *et al*,1997). They then prepare a nest of twigs or leaves before giving birth. The standard practice of confining sows in the farrowing crate a week before they give birth not only restrains them at a time of increased restlessness but also denies them the privacy they desire by forcing them into close proximity with other sows. Building a nest has been described as "the single, strongest instinct for a sow" (Per Jensen, quoted on Bowman website) and research indicates a very strong desire for sows to obtain nesting materials (Arey, 1992). Even when they have nothing but a hard floor, sows still attempt to build a nest, pawing at the floor, nuzzling the bars and attempting to turn around. Although new legislation is supposed to compel farmers to provide some straw for sows in the crate, for a confined sow in a metal cage on hard flooring inside a building, the nesting instinct will still be completely frustrated.

Farrowing crates cruelly restrict the interaction sows have with their young. Here a sow tries to reach two dead piglets but is prevented from doing so

While confined in the crate, the sow is unable to move toward her piglets when she wants to but is also prevented from moving away from them when she wants to. This can lead to aggression towards piglets, with 1 in 8 piglets fatally mauled by their mothers (New Scientist, 2000) and in some cases mauling will occur in as many as 50 per cent of litters (NADIS, 2008). This is a very rare event in the wild. The stress that the farrowing crate puts on the sow can actually result in protracted farrowing, which can result in increases in piglet death (FAI, 2011).

The farrowing crate itself can cause the sow painful sores and also pain and fatigue due to immobility. It can also lead to reduced bone density and muscle weakness through lack of exercise, as well as overgrown hooves and increased risk of lameness (FAI 2011). Studies of hormone levels also indicate raised levels of stress in confined sows (Cronin, 1996; Jarvis *et al*, 1997; Lawrence *et al*, 1994; Lynch *et al*, website). Confined sows are also more aggressive than sows who have not been confined when returned to pens with other pigs (DEFRA, 2002).

ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS

There has been an increasing move to try and develop indoor systems for farrowing that are not as restrictive for the sows. However, despite many systems being developed no commercially viable/feasible option has been deemed viable for large scale units (UFAW 2011). The reasons for this are obvious: these systems mostly demand more space per sow, more staff and therefore cost money and potentially provide lower returns for farmers. There are also concerns for the safety of staff that come into contact with unrestrained sows whilst trying to access piglets.

Alternative farrowing systems - such as Solari, Volkenroder and Werribbee pens - have achieved broadly comparable weaning rates to conventional crates in experimental conditions (ibid; Arnott, 2001; Cronin *et al*, 1999; Far Eastern Agriculture) while outdoor herds have lower mortality rates than indoor, according to MLC research (Far Eastern Agriculture, 1996). Selection of sows – both by breed and as individuals – for "good" mothering is also effective in reducing piglet mortality from crushing and other causes in organic and conventional farming (Brown, personal communication; DEFRA, 2004b).

In 2010, one producer launched a crate called a 360 farrower (Midland Pig Producers). The idea is that sows can fully turn around (albeit after four days of being fully restrained), and paper pads are provided to encourage nesting behaviour (although this will be nothing like the real experience for the sow). Emphasising the welfare problems of the traditional crate, sows in this system eat more and produce more milk; this has a knock on effect of healthier piglets that weigh more. However, it is still a poor imitation of a natural existence.

Other systems - such as voluntary crate (where a sow can leave the crate for food and exercise) - has been widely rejected by producers again largely because of the increased costs involved (CABI 2010).

Currently, the RSPCA's Freedom Foods' scheme allows for sows to be confined to farrowing crates for up to 10 days at a time (up to 5 days before birth and up to 5 days after birth). During this time she will not be able to even turn around. However, the scheme will prohibit farrowing crates from December 31 2013.

Despite the British pig industry routinely suggesting that British welfare standards are the best in the world, other comparable countries have already banned or limited the use of farrowing crates including Sweden and Switzerland.

CRUSHING MYTHS

The crate is supposedly used to prevent sows from accidentally crushing their piglets. In fact, the danger of crushing is a direct consequence of factory farming techniques. In the wild, nests protect piglets from crushing for piglets if lain on; because piglets may simply fall through or out of nests; and because the sow roots around before lying down giving the piglets warning that she is about to do so. The crate offers none of these forms of protection. Factory farming also depends on minimising staff costs and that means that most births are unsupervised. Brazil had half the pre-weaning mortality of the USA in the early 1990s because of higher staff ratios (Holyoake *et al*, 1995) and other South American countries have achieved mortality rates as low as 3 per cent (Guise & Mayland, 1998). Despite the argument that farrowing crates prevent the sow from crushing her piglets, overall pre-weaning mortality rates currently range from 16-20 per cent in Britain. Meaning that approximately two million piglets each year in the UK die before leaving their mother (Knowledge Scotland, 2011). Add to this an average post-weaning mortality rate of 5.28 per cent (BPEX, 2011).

Although promoted as a way to protect piglets from being inadvertently crushed by their mothers, farrowing crates can in fact exacerbate crushing

In fact, It has been suggested that the crate changes the nature of the crushing of piglets; with the inability to turn around leading to sudden lying down, which may increase the risk of crushing under her hindquarters (CABI 2010).

Piglet mortality increases with larger litter sizes (Jarvis, 2002) and pigs today have been bred to produce litters of up to fifteen piglets, where naturally around 8 would be normal. The numbers of piglets each sow will have in Britain each year is continuing to increase (the average is 22.25 per annum, but can be over 27) (BPEX, Pig Yearbook 2011). The largest farms tend to have the highest mortality rates amongst those pigs, with 13.82 per cent dying before slaughter (BPEX, 2011). Large litter sizes increase competition and lead to malnourishment for weaker piglets. Weaker piglets are at greater risk of being crushed (Arey *et al*, 1992). Recent evidence suggests that dietary changes alone may have a significant impact on crushing death rates for piglets (Allison, 2003). Farmers are also likely to blame crushing for deaths which are actually caused by malnourishment (Vallaincourt, quoted in Holyoake *et al*, 1995). In fact, piglets in farrowing crates appear *more* likely to die as a result of savaging by the sow, starvation/chilling and splay leg (Cronin *et al*, 1996).

The crate also confines piglets. In the wild, three week-old piglets would usually be found 20-30m from the sow (Pasille & Robert, 1989). In the crate they are also unable to mix with other litters and this makes them more prone to fighting when they are weaned (DEFRA 2002). Piglets reared in open systems demonstrate improved weight-gain after weaning and exhibit fewer skin lesions, another sign of fighting (Malkin *et al*, website; DEFRA, 2002).

WEANING

Natural weaning age for pigs is between 12 and 15 weeks and the process occurs gradually over the weeks before final weaning. Abrupt weaning, whether at 21 or 28 days, is more than piglets' immature digestive systems can cope with (Van Heugten, website), often leading to scours - diarrhoea - and failure to thrive. As a result, piglets require medication and, in intensive conditions, end up on a daily regime of drugs. Weaning in this abrupt manner is also, clearly, a psychological trauma to both mother and piglets. Surprisingly, evidence suggests that scours is worse on outdoor units (or, perhaps, more tellingly) units where pigs are weaned outdoors and then moved indoors onto intensive units as usually happens (NADIS 2008).

No method of farrowing for pigs raised for food truly mirrors the natural relationship between mother and young. All animals raised for food will suffer

The problem the farrowing crate is designed to address - piglet crushing - is a direct result of factory farming techniques. While pigs are reared intensively that problem will persist.

The farrowing crate is designed to increase productivity of piglets. It is not used to preserve their welfare but to preserve the meat they will produce. Farmers - and the Government - accept its severe adverse consequences for both sow and piglet welfare because it is, at present, the most cost-effective system overall. From a welfare point of view, it is indefensible. However, outdoor systems have their problems too; with most pigs born outdoors moved indoors after weaning and sows living only a fraction of their natural lives. The bottom line is that even if you can provide pigs with a relatively good life it will never be a long one, as all pigs – whether they are the product of an organic farm or a factory farm – will end up in the same place: subjected to the horrors of the slaughterhouse.

The only way to truly end the suffering of animals is to simply not eat them and go veggie.

For more information about British pig farming and how you can help end this suffering visit www.piggles.org.uk. References available on request and are also on the website.