



Farrowing House Series - Nørregaard

Owned by Ole and Sanne Mathiasen, Nørregaard is a 750-sow farm producing roughly 21,500 30kg pigs and a further 4,000 finished to market weight. Supplying the Antonius brand of Danish Crown, the farm meets standards including 30-day weaning, pigs with intact tails, and zero sow confinement during farrowing and lactation. The farm use DanBred Top Duroc sires and are transitioning their female line to Topigs Norsivin, from Hendrix Genetics.

Non-confinement pens

- **Pen size:** 2.3 x 3 = 6.9m²
- **Number:** 408 pens installed in 2014
- **Schedule:** two-week batch farrowing
- **Floor:** 1/3 cast iron slats, 2/3 solid concrete
- **Creep:** alongside aisle way, drying powder used until 14 days and chopped straw added post-farrowing. Flooring and lamp heating provided.
- **Enrichment:** straw provided daily except during farrowing. Drying powder added at farrowing.
- **Successful modifications:** slippery epoxy flooring was replaced with textured concrete, which is better for the piglets, but harder to clean.
- **Issues:** higher* pre-wean mortality, sitting at 19.6% of liveborns
- **Improvement opportunity:** would like to incorporate a sow feeder that is suitable for weaner access, as piglets remain in pen until 30kgs. Potential to change to weaner wet feed.

* Compared to Denmark's conventional crated 2025 industry average

Sow and piglet management

Sows are acclimatised to pens for just over a week before farrowing and remain loose throughout farrowing and lactation. Pain relief is provided pre-farrowing (powder added to feed) resulting in calmer sows and a 4% reduction in pre-wean mortality. Dedicated farrowing staff manage the sow and litter for the first two weeks, after which another stockperson takes over care until weaned. While manual checks can be tricky if sows are lying awkwardly, staff are confident in handling her while loose, and encourage her to stand. Litter equalisation and fostering are carried out as needed, but split suckling is only used for large litters of 20 or more (average 18.4 piglets born alive per litter). Foster sows only receive piglets up to the number of functional teats; gilts are given one less to help maintain body condition.

Piglets are processed on day two with iron and coccidiosis treatments. The farm currently conducts teeth grinding (though planning to phase out) and surgical castration on day three, but is transitioning to immunocastration. Creep feed is introduced at day seven, with a gradual transition to weaner feed the week before the sow is removed. Weaners are then grouped into pens of 16 at ~33 days of age and on average 8.5kgs, maintaining litter mates when possible. Ole sees that keeping pigs in the farrowing pen until 30kg as a major benefit as it avoids weaning stress by keeping feed, water, and surroundings consistent, with only the sow removed.



Learning the system

Nørregaard is run by farm manager Frederik Holm Vistedsen, along with six full time employees, one of which is a trainee.

A key farm priority is ensuring staff feel confident working in the farrowing pens with the loose sow. Ole emphasises the importance of building trust with the sow; approaching calmly, making contact before entering the pen, and being aware of how their behaviour can influence her responses.

This helps keep both staff and animals safe and reduces the chance of startling the sow.

Tasks like medicating sows and catching piglets can be more challenging in non-confinement systems. Ole acknowledges that not all staff have adapted to the change, and some have been reassigned to roles better suited to their comfort and skills. He sees matching staff to the right areas as essential, “if someone feels unsafe, it’s not good for them or the animals”.



“ If you’re just looking to profit then this is not the system, I try to inspire other farmers, because if you like working with animals, this will be the right system ”

- Ole, on having an interest in non-confinement systems for a successful transition.

Advice to farmers

When designing farrowing pens, Ole advises allocating more space than the minimum legal requirements to ensure infrastructure remains compliant and functional long term. While this requires higher upfront investment, it can prevent costly rebuilds if legislation changes in the future. Although committed to the Antonius non-confinement standards, if given the choice, he would prefer to confine sows for 2 to 3 days around farrowing to help reduce pre-weaning mortality.

Having worked with non-confinement systems for over a decade, Ole had little external guidance at the beginning and had to learn through trial and error. He emphasises that this system is not for those driven solely by profit, it requires genuine interest in working with animals.

APL continues to support traditional farrowing systems while recognising and supporting research into alternative systems, balancing the health and welfare of sow, piglets and the people caring for them. Research is part of our commitment to demonstrating science led animal welfare which underpins our commitment to continual improvement in the care of our pigs and our people.



MORE INFORMATION

For technical information, contact the APL team at extension@australianpork.com.au