



Farrowing House Series

- SunPork Group

SunPork runs 53,000 sows across Australia and produces 1.25 million farrow to finish pigs each year. Over the past decade, Executive GM -Technical Services Dr Darryl D'Souza, and Science, Technology and Adoption Manager, Dr Kate Plush, together with the wider team, have led the development of the Maternity Ring. SunPork uses PIC Australia genetics.



Non-confinement pens

- Pen size: $1.8 \times 2.35 = 4.23\text{m}^2$
- Ring internal: $1.16 \times 2.06 = 1.88\text{m}^2$
- Number: 1,000 pens across 5 sites, with plans to fully convert all sites
- Schedule: weekly farrowing
- Floor: fully steel slats, concrete creep and creep entry
- Creep: alongside aisle way, with heat mat to provide warmth and an LED to attract piglets
- Benefits: Sows have 360° view of her surroundings, allowing for a more relaxed sow.
- Successful modifications: plastic slatted flooring has since been replaced with steel to encourage piglets to use the creep.

Sow and piglet management

All SunPork farms have specific farrowing house staff who monitor sows and provide day-one care. On their smaller farms, this care is given first thing in the morning to sows that have farrowed, while on larger farms it is performed twice daily.

Manual examinations are uncommon, and while the height of the maternity ring does not present problems, staff will stand sows up if they are lying awkwardly. Piglet pre-wean mortality currently sits at 15.4%.



On average, 15.8 piglets are born alive per litter, with 15% of farrowing pens used for nurse sows. Piglets are matched to the number of functional teats. Gilts and well performing first-parity sows are often allocated one additional piglet, and fostering is carried out as needed. While feed intake during lactation has not necessarily increased in the Maternity Ring, sows appear to milk better. Kate attributes this to the freedom of movement, noting that when sows can stretch out during milk let down, piglets gain better access to the udder and provide stronger stimulation, leading to improved milk production. On average piglets are weaned at 21 days of age, weighing roughly 6.9kgs.

Learning the system

One of the biggest challenges in developing a non-confinement pen was ensuring staff safety. To support this, SunPork is creating a Certificate 4 training module specifically for Maternity Ring staff. When learning the system, Kate notes that skilled farrowing attendants in crate systems generally transition quickly to non-confinement systems. Staff are taught to pay close attention to detail in that each sow and piglets must be observed and have their needs managed on an individual basis.

In the early stages of transition, there was a natural hesitancy for staff to work in the new system, and they often defaulted to spending more time in the crates, as they simply felt more comfortable with that system. However, pairing a trainee with an experienced staff member helped to build experience and confidence and once sites had fully adopted the Maternity Ring, staff adapted well, and now many prefer working in the loose system, praising how calm the sows are compared to crates.

The feedback from staff is that there are tasks such as medicating sows and piglets, or scraping down pens each day that are disliked as they feel these tasks are easier to perform in crate systems, admittedly the pen design makes it more difficult for staff to move between pens when sows need to be medicated. On the other hand, tasks such as weaning and feeding are preferred in the new system as it is easier, and there is less feed wastage and therefore less to clean out.

SunPork has established an open-forum style management group for the Maternity Ring, bringing together farm and farrowing managers from sites where the system is installed, or planned. This group provides a platform for sharing experiences, addressing challenges, and refining pen design, which has proven highly effective in solving issues and aligning performance targets.

Go and experience the system for a few days with an open mind to see and feel how it can work

- Kate's advice to farmers considering making the transition

Advice to farmers

Kate notes that once the decision was made to adopt the Maternity Ring, staff attitudes shifted from questioning *is this a good idea?* to a more solutions-focused mindset. Like many farms, SunPork had to correct management practices that were hindering productivity, such as ensuring the right number of gilts, removing poor performers early, and building staff confidence in working within the system. As these improvements took hold, confidence in the system grew, and staff became better equipped to manage the system.

Her advice to farmers is to be upfront with staff: the transition represents a significant change for both people and animals, and there will be a period of adjustment. Success comes through persistence, refining management, and supporting staff during times when performance may temporarily drop. Training and knowledge sharing are critical, and she recommends that farmers experience the system first hand for several days with an open mind. Simply installing a few pens won't provide enough insight, neither for animals, who may not return to farrow in those pens, nor for staff, who may be reluctant to engage with a system they don't fully understand.

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

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