



Farrowing House Series

Take home messages

In June 2025, Norval Agriconsulting undertook a holistic review of alternative farrowing systems, focusing on five farms that have transitioned from traditional farrowing crates to either reduced-confinement or non-confinement pens. The aim was to gather practical insights for Australian pig producers considering a move to loose lactation systems, with a strong emphasis on producer experiences and day-to-day management. The review drew on three Danish farms operating reduced-confinement systems, alongside one Danish and one Australian farm using non-confinement systems.

Pen design

Confinement during farrowing - Three of the four Danish farms operate reduced-confinement systems. One farm trialled both non- and reduced-confinement pen designs but opted to confine sows during farrowing due to increased piglet mortality. The fourth farm uses non-confinement pens as it is a requirement of their supply chain; however, if given the option, they would confine sows for 2 - 3 days around farrowing to improve piglet survival.

Keeping the creep comfortable - Farms focused on making the creep area as comfortable as possible while keeping the rest of the pen thermally less appealing to encourage piglets to use the creep. For example, metal slatted flooring improves hygiene and keeps the sow cool, and is uncomfortable enough to encourage piglets into the creep. One farm reported that piglets were drawn to the “dark, protective nature” of a creep with a low roof and dim lighting, while another believed the lighting attracted piglets into the creep.





Managing sow, piglet, and people

Expect an adjustment period - Most farms saw an initial rise in piglet mortality after moving from crates to non- or reduced-confinement systems. For context, in 2024 the average pre-weaning mortality in conventional Danish systems was 14%. In the case studies, mortality ranged from 7% - 19%, however length of time since transition differed from months to 10+ years.

Improvement comes with experience - Farms reported that as staff gained confidence and management practices were refined, mortality levels generally stabilised, highlighting the importance of persistence and continual improvement.

Better milk production - A common belief was that sows in these systems appeared to milk better. Producers attributed this to the sows' ability to move, stretch, and stimulate circulation, which they believe results in healthier, stronger piglets.

Training and confidence - Most farms reported that staff adjusted to working with loose housed sows quite quickly. A buddy system works well for training new employees, pairing them with an experienced staff member until they are confident in the new environment. One farm moved staff around to ensure they were working within their comfort and skill level. Great importance was placed on having a dedicated early piglet care attendant present around farrowing.

Learn from others - Farms that prepared in advance had the smoothest transitions. They took time to research how the system works, and considered how daily tasks like feeding, cleaning, handling piglets or medicating sows would need to change. A common recommendation was to speak with producers who have already made the transition. Their experience can help identify which pen designs and management strategies are mostly likely to work for different operational styles.

Making contact with the sow - All farms acknowledged the importance of ensuring the sows see you before entering her pen - a simple step that helps to keep her calm and makes handling safer for both animals and staff.



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

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