

» HOUSING

Sow group housing: Is it catching on in the US?

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» For better or for worse, a certain number of U.S. hog farmers will make the change from gestation crates to group sow housing as meat packers start pressuring them to change.

Today, more than 80 percent of the sows in the U.S. use gestation crates — a trend that is under pressure from animal rights activists. In January 2014, two major meat packers announced that in ten years all their

pressure from meat packers and the effect that group housing has on production. The hog operations that are already experimenting with group housing say there are multiple ways to meet this mandate without losing out on production. But they have yet to see a significant increase in production.

Learn more about successful sow feeding systems for group housing
www.WATTAgNet.com/153660.html

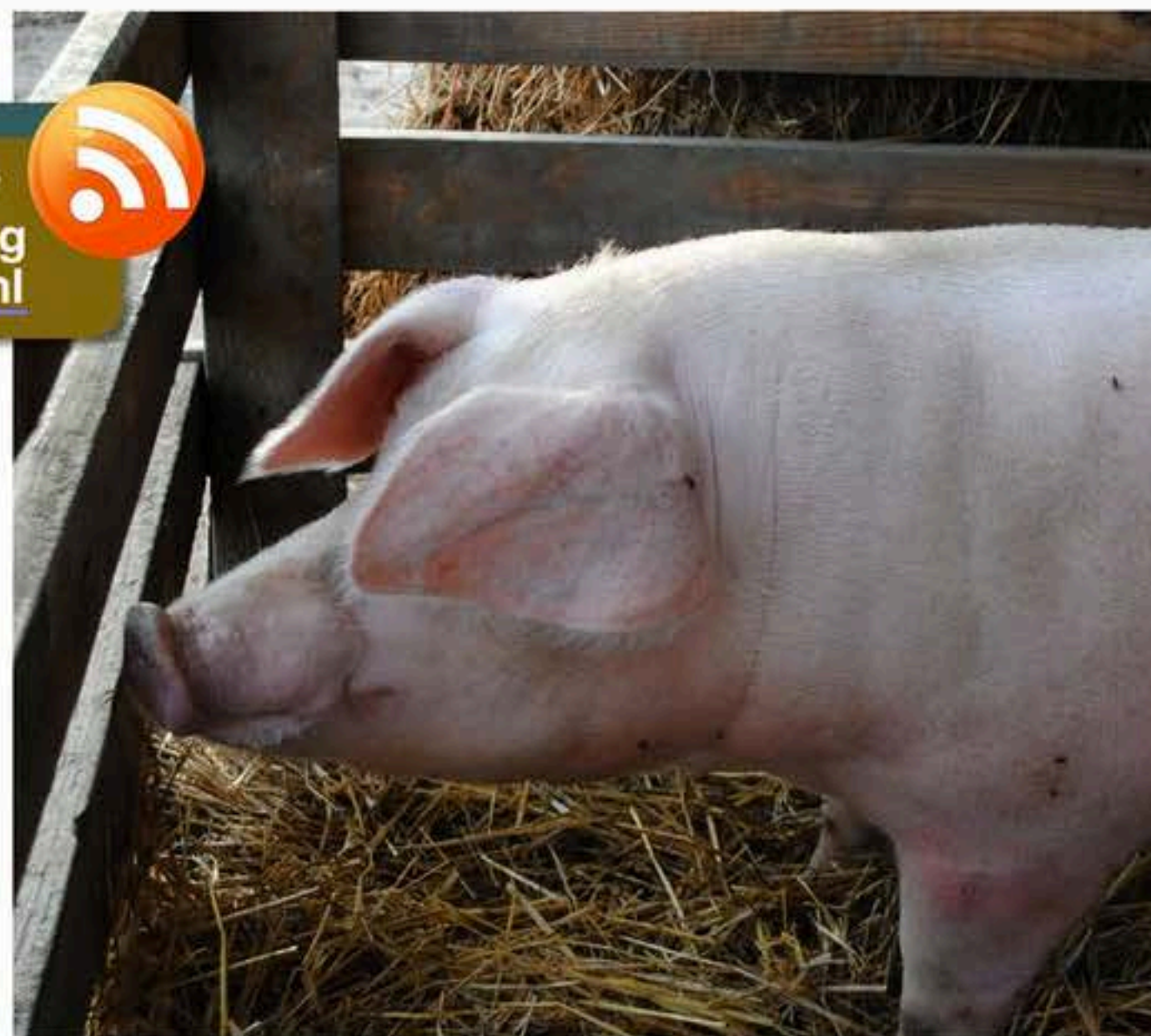


contractors will make the transition to group housing — a mandate that contradicts the consumer demand for affordable pork.

Group housing can cost up to \$1,000 per sow — more than many producers can afford to spend to make people feel good about their food. Nonetheless, it is inevitable that the industry is changing, and U.S. producers are optimistic that this is just another hurdle that they'll manage to get over.

The driving decision comes down to the

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How to choose what to give up to keep farming

For the majority of hog producers in the U.S., ten years isn't enough time to transition from gestation crates to group housing, simply because current facilities and equipment do not wear off that fast. However, there are less costly ways to make the change by manually taking apart gestation crates to build bigger pens.

Contrary to theory, producers that are using this method prefer smaller pens with four to six sows per pen versus larger pens with big groups of sows. Theoretically it is easier to add sows to large groups because the other sows are less likely to notice when a new sow is added, and therefore there are fewer fights. But, producers say that the small groups in small pens have fewer injuries and are easier to manage. The key is to give sows privacy

by providing ample space — 18 to 25 square feet per sow is considered optimal.

For logistical reasons, producers that cut down their crates to make group pens will either downsize their herds by approximately 20 percent or build more barns and expand. This option works hand-in-hand as a way to do standard upkeep and renovate older barns. This is also an opportunity for producers to experiment with

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a group-housing method that works with their budget and management style.

Keep moving forward and believe you'll get somewhere good

Group housing is just a step towards more regulations for the U.S. hog industry. And with the markets and regulations pushing for large operations, the producers' approach to group housing will ultimately determine their fate as a hog farmer. The hog producers with less than 30 years of farming left under their belts are considering an early exit plan for their operations. While family farms that are being managed by a younger generation are looking to expand the family operation in order to survive another generation of hog farming.

Electronic sow feeding systems (ESFs) are hailed as the group housing system of the future. At a cost of more than a million dollars, ESFs are focused on surpassing subsequent regulations. The basis of the system is that each pig is identified and tracked with a radio frequency identification (RFID) tag. This helps producers keep track on their computer of who is eating, and how often. But more importantly, RFID tags stick to the idea that soon all pigs will be tracked from the farm to the meat packer to the grocery store shelf — as both a government regulation, and a consumer demand.

The investment is worth learning about as more and more hog producers experiment with the ESF system. As of now, producers that have a strong team of workers are confident with the management style and the level of health the ESFs give their herd. While the time spent managing sows in ESFs is comparable to the time spent in other