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# SOW POOLS : A MULTISITE SYSTEM FOR SMALL - HERD FARMERS

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper I am going to describe a Swedish system for piglet production, in which the small-herd farmer is given the possibility of an effective and profitable production system. The system also contributes to keeping piglet production viable, although rationalization of the structure in this branch is extremely hard on small-herd farmers. The system was created in Sweden, on terms which are specific to this area. The paper should therefore be considered as a presentation of the system, and not an evaluation of economic or production results. My experience of the system is a result of my work as a farm manager at Widtsköfle Estate, Kristianstad. On the farm Widtsköfle, we keep 1500 sows in a central unit, and serve 26 small-herd farmers (satellite herds). We have been operating the system since 1993.*

## INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the system, it is necessary to give a brief description of the way in which Swedish pig production, at the farm level, has developed over the last 20 years.

Swedish pig production can, to a large extent, be divided into piglet producers and producers who specialize in fattening piglets for slaughter. Recently, due to low prices, integrated production has increased rapidly.



Today, 50 per cent of the piglets are produced in herds with less than 50 sows, and 50 per cent of these herds are run by farmers who are over the age of 55 years.

Even 20 years ago, it was an easily established fact that much of the piglet production would be lost as a result of various factors, and that this would have serious consequences for the Swedish pork industry.

Results from farm-level studies showed that the small-herd often experienced health problems, due to continuous production. So an "all-in, all-out" system was necessary. The lack of management also contributed to low production. In the planting and harvesting seasons the piggery unit was often the production unit on the farm which suffered most from a shortage of working hours. Many family farmers also have off-farm jobs. All these factors raised the need for planned production.

It was during the consideration of these questions and problems that the concept of sow pools was conceived. The fundamental purpose of the system would be a pool of sows which could be leased.

#### MANAGEMENT

The pool handles a total herd of 1500 sows. At any one time there are 1000 sows at the central unit and the remainder are out on the satellite farms. Sows return to the central unit at weaning, and they are housed in groups of 12 in pens with free access stalls, for both natural service and artificial insemination. All services are by Hampshire boars or semen; about 95 per cent of the insemination is artificial.

Each week on Thursday is weaning day, and the day for transportation to the satellite units. From Monday to Thursday of the following week, 90 per cent of the services are performed. After four weeks, the sows are moved from the service house into a control unit, still in groups of twelve to a pen. When they are diagnosed as being pregnant, the sows are moved into a different building, "the sea" with pens of 25-30 sows on deep straw bedding. In this unit there is a possibility for individual feeding



of sows which are either too thin or too fat. Sows remain in this building until three weeks before their expected farrowing dates, after which they are transported to the satellite units in livestock trucks.

The satellite unit operates an all-in, all-out system and it orders enough sows, in a single batch, to fill its entire farrowing accommodation. After a minimum period of four weeks after farrowing, the sows are weaned and returned to the pool. The most common system is an eight-week turnover, which means that new sows are delivered at the same time as the weaned sows are collected. In this case, the satellite unit must have a "welcome unit" where the new herd is kept for a week or so whilst the farrowing unit is cleaned. In the 16 week turnover system the piglets are left in the farrowing pen for another six weeks before entering the finishing units.

Two people manage the central unit; all vaccinations and veterinary treatment occur in the central unit. The central unit follows a program endorsed by the Swedish Animal Health Service.

## CONTRACT

There is a contract drawn up between the central unit and the satellite unit. This contract regulates the treatment of sows, the lease charge, the conditions of the lease and the guarantees. The lease is regulated by the price of slaughter pigs at the time of leasing. Included in the lease are all medical treatments, transportation of the sow from and to the central unit, and a guarantee of a minimum of 10 piglets born alive per litter. Payment is due 10 days after delivery of the sows. One-year's notice is required to terminate the contract.

## RESULTS OF THE SYSTEM

With regard to the satellite farm, the following benefits can cited:

Planned Production



- All-in, All-out
- Better health status
- Easier planning of work
- Possibility of even litters
- Economic Benefits
  - Better price for piglets, due to larger groups
  - guarantee of full groups of sows
  - guarantee of at least 10 piglets per sow

As far as the central unit is concerned, the following benefits can be listed:

- Economic Benefits
  - Moderate investment
  - All the farm-produced grain is used

One disadvantage of the system is that the total herd will suffer if one of the satellite herds fail. Considerable care and good judgement are important qualities in a satellite farmer.

## **FUTURE**

The sow pool system was started as a method to ensure that smaller piglet producers received the benefits of large-scale production. In the future the central unit will probably serve a smaller number of larger satellite herds. These larger herds will probably be owned by one or more farmers, in a joint stock company or co-operative ownership. The distance between the sites will remain the same, about 100-150 km. This will make the system a more traditional multi-site system.

## **CONCLUSION**

About 30 per cent. of all piglets produced in Sweden are from sow pools, and this trend is increasing.



After the low prices and almost depression-like pork production during 1998 and the beginning of 1999, many sows have been slaughtered. Sow pools are the fastest way to start up production again.

Systems that are geographically spread and divided into special units (i.e. multi-site systems) are the future way of pork production in which the management of the various aspects of production will become specialized.



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