

Just the Facts!

Handling/Management to Prevent Stress in Show Pigs

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Today's show pig industry is at a point where decisions regarding future direction are needed. While pigs have responded to selection for increased muscling and leanness, these traits have reached such extremes that many of our customers are no longer satisfied with pork from show pigs. Packers that are willing to purchase show pigs are increasingly hard to find, due to pigs that will not meet the standards of packers, retailers, and consumers. Management practices, genetics, transport to shows, and handling before, during, and after the show all affect meat quality. Changes in management and handling of show pigs can decrease the number of "deads and downers," which is necessary for the show pig industry to be viable in the future.

The Stress Gene

Presence of the porcine stress gene in the show pig industry is one of the contributors to "dead or downer" pigs and poor pork quality. Stress positive pigs exhibit extreme nervousness and excitability when exposed to stressful situations resulting in pale, soft, and exudative pork and increased death loss. Show pig producers should use boars, gilts, and sows that are stress gene negative (NN) to prevent these problems. Too much muscle, not enough fat Extreme muscling and leanness, even in the commercial swine industry, have many packers reducing premiums for heavy market hogs and carcasses with less than 0.6 inches of backfat. Ultra-lean hogs do not yield enough belly thickness to produce high-quality bacon, which is in high demand. As a general rule, about 0.6 inches of backfat correlates to approximately 0.6 inches of belly thickness, which is needed to make bacon.

Feed additives

Misuse and abuse of feed additives, including Paylean[®], can also affect the ability of a pig to handle stress. Many times these feed additives are fed by topdressing. It is human nature to believe that "if a little bit is good, a lot is better," which is not true. Interactions between feed additives need to be considered. Most feed additives alter metabolism as well as nutrient partitioning (the way the nutrients are used in the body), which can also alter the way a show pig may handle stress. Some pigs simply cannot handle this change in metabolic rate

when subjected to the stresses of transportation and the show ring.

From one environment to another

Many changes occur in the pig's surroundings from home to when they reach the showring. Show pigs are generally raised in a somewhat quiet, subdued environment with little stress. Loading and transporting can be stressful to a pig, particularly if handlers become frustrated. Pigs that are mixed together will instinctively fight to establish a pecking order. Upon arriving at a show, the new sights, smells, and sounds can affect a pig's behavior. To minimize stress, pigs can be loaded and unloaded onto a trailer to get used to the practice before it is time to go to the show. A radio can be played in the barn to expose pigs to different sounds. Loading and transporting in the coolest part of the day, wetting shavings, providing water periodically during transport, keeping pigs out of the sun, and keeping the trailer moving to provide air flow will all help keep the pigs calm comfortable. Everyone handling the animals should be trained and be able to move the pigs at a slow pace, keeping tempers in check. The use of an electric prod is a stressful event and it should be avoided or absolutely minimized. It is recommended to move pigs in small groups (3-5).

The importance of feed and water

Complete withholding or severe restriction of feed or water as a weight management tool is not acceptable. Pigs should be weighed weekly to monitor growth and be fed accordingly. Water should never be withheld for any length of time. Not only is this inhumane, but since muscle is comprised mostly of water, muscle changes shape and becomes less expressive. Additionally, many feed additives that alter metabolism cause the animal to require more water.

Summary

Animal welfare continues to be an important issue facing both the commercial and show pig industries. There are many preventative measures that can be taken to minimize stress, improve handling, and increase pork quality. Addressing this important issue will help ensure the continuance of swine shows and the show pig industry.