



Enrich Your Pigs, Enrich Your Profits

By Geoff Geddes for Swine Innovation Porc | June 17, 2021



Sows interacting with chains used as enrichment. Photo: CDPQ (Centre de développement du porc du Québec)

If “sow enrichment” sparks images of pigs by the pool sipping Mai Tais, you’ve been badly misinformed. As it turns out, enriching a sow’s environment is easy, inexpensive and offers a range of benefits. This was made clear by the project “From Innovation to Adoption: On-farm demonstration of Swine Research”, which was led by Ken Engele at Prairie Swine Centre and Geneviève Berthiaume at CDPQ. One aspect of the project examined environmental enrichment and strategies to improve laying areas for gestating sows.

What’s news in the nursery?

Based on audits at 18 nursery facilities, the project found good news and bad news. On the plus side, pork producers are doing well at adopting best management practices in their barns. Unfortunately, enrichment in the nursery could use some work, with only 11% of audited farms employing it for their animals. While the numbers were better for enrichment in finishing facilities (65%), there is room for improvement, especially with the updated “Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Pigs” requiring multiple forms of enrichment on farm.





Boosting those numbers was a key focus of this project as it gathered producer experiences in using three types of enrichment: a chain suspended from the ceiling, a piece of wood suspended by a chain, and a Porcichew toy (ring of aromatic plastic), also suspended by a chain.

Chain reactions

Uptake by the animals varied somewhat depending on the form of enrichment. Though interest was highest right after the object appeared, with sows often lining up for a turn with it, producers reported that animals remained engaged – to a lesser degree – in the days that followed.

Among the benefits of enrichment cited by participants, several noted a reduction in pen aggression. As one producer put it: “I’d rather see them chewing on wood than chewing on each other.” Given the prevalence of tail biting and ear chewing in many pens, anything that minimizes aggression is worth exploring.

Popularity contest

Though it’s not a popular plaything for humans, the chain garnered the most interest among pigs on the project. One person even noted that his animals played more with the chain than with the chew toy attached to it, though he stressed that the toy got its share of attention as well. While the chain also proved the most durable of the enrichment options, some farms were pleasantly surprised by the lifespan of the wood, which survived for several months despite vigorous attention.

It can be hard to find consensus on issues in the pork industry; however, producers involved in this survey were quick to recommend the installation of enrichments in sow group housing.

Of course, as this project demonstrated, enrichment must be carefully thought out and designed with the pigs in mind. Above all, material should be stimulating and possess a number of other traits in order to gain and hold the user’s interest: destructible, edible, deformable, chewable, odorous and clean.

Producers involved in the study found pigs were attracted by the newness of items, and they stressed that rotating enrichment material regularly is essential to keep it novel and engaging.

Knowing what to use for enrichment is critical, but knowing what to avoid is equally important. In a flooring system with slats, small organic material may slip between the slats and clog liquid manure removal systems. Before introducing a new item, scrutinize it like a toy for your grandchild to rule out any health hazards like choking or poisoning.

Location, location, location

Once you’ve chosen the object, note the importance of location. Research reveals that items hung at eye level garner more interest from pigs than ones that sit on the floor. If you must use the floor, keep them in boxes so they stay clean and hold their appeal.

One comment from a project participant was that enrichment pieces tend to be cheap to buy and quick to install. Though the cost and time involved will vary from farm to farm, enhancing your pigs' environment is an investment that can pay big dividends in the long run: improved animal performance in areas like feed intake, average daily gain (ADG) and feed conversion ratio (FCR); fewer incidents of abnormal behavior such as biting, tail-biting and aggression; broader range of behaviors; reduced animal stress.

There's a lot to consider when it comes to pig enrichment. Fortunately, one of the main benefits of these on-farm demonstrations is the chance to test real world applications and get the producer's perspective on the issue. At least one of those producers felt overanalyzing enrichment might not be necessary:

"If you just have to hang a chain and it works well, and gets the aggression out of the sows, why not?" 😊

Additional information...

If you would like to learn more about the work described in this article please contact:

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This work was part of national on-farm demonstration project that took place in 2016-2018 titled *From Innovation to Adoption: On-Farm Demonstration of Swine Research..*

Acknowledgements

The work presented in this article was part of Swine Innovation Porc's Swine Cluster 2: Driving Results Through Innovation research program. Funding was provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's AgriInnovation Program, provincial producer organizations and industry partners.