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THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES



Animal Alliance of Canada



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Stichting Varkens in Nood



Eyes on Animals

Watching out for their welfare

Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals



Coalition canadienne pour la protection des animaux de ferme

February 22, 2010

Hello,

**For your information**

Copy of a letter sent to Canadian grocers about pig castration

**Re: Castration of piglets in Canada**

The castration of piglets has been a topic of heated debate for some time. Most western nations castrate piglets because of concern over boar taint – the unpleasant odour that occurs occasionally in meat from non-castrated pigs. Despite the long history of castration – a surgical procedure typically done without anaesthetic – animal welfarists, pig farmers and grocers are now moving to end this unnecessary procedure.

Recent research findings from the European scientific community, plus slaughter-industry initiatives in Germany and the Netherlands, show ending pig castration is both feasible and practical. [Please see attached detailed information.]

Results show previous beliefs about boar taint are not accurate, and the true incidence is very low. Taint can be easily detected at the slaughterhouse, and most consumers cannot even detect low levels of taint in their meat. Furthermore, intact male pigs grow faster, consume less feed and are healthier, thus requiring less medical attention. Finally, they produce less manure.

There are compelling reasons to end pig castration in Canada. It is economically beneficial to producers, it benefits animals and the environment, and there are no complaints from consumers.

Circumstances in the Canadian pork industry are comparable to the Netherlands. Pigs are slaughtered at the same age and weight, similar or identical breeds are used, slaughterhouses are similarly modern, and both have access to new ideas and procedures. As Dutch grocers have moved to end castration, so can Canadian grocers.

We politely ask you to take action and meet with your suppliers to discuss our request. Grocers create demand for meat from castrated pigs, or alternatively, create demand for meat from intact male pigs. Campaigns in Europe have demonstrated that when consumers become informed of this cruel and unnecessary practice, they are strongly opposed to it. We suspect the same will be true of Canadian consumers.

We kindly ask you to respond to our letter within the coming four weeks. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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## **Background**

### **Boar taint is much less common than previously believed.**

In England, Portugal, Spain, and Ireland, most male pigs are not castrated. In these countries, pigs are slaughtered slightly earlier and at a lower weight, about 80-90 kg, than in the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, Germany, etc. In these countries, the market demands older and slightly heavier slaughter pigs. It is assumed boar taint is more prevalent in older animals, confirming the belief castration is necessary.

In 2008, scientific research was conducted in the Netherlands to determine the frequency of taint among intact boars. The report (*Beren op de Weg Wageningen UR, March 2008*) concluded that of 677 random boars, only 1.2% had high levels of skatole and androstenone – biochemical components of boar taint. In the same sample, 23 boars had slightly higher than average levels of skatole and androstenone, representing 3.39% of the total. Previously, rates were thought to be much higher.

In practice, this rate may be even lower. In February 2009, the seventh largest slaughterhouse in the world, Tönnies Fleisch in Germany, started slaughtering intact boars between 6.5 - 7 months old (115kg - 120kg live weight, 94kg - 96kg carcass weight) to satisfy the new demand from Dutch clients for intact boar meat. By September 2009 they were slaughtering 5000 intact boars per week to meet consumer demand for higher-welfare meat. To date, there has not been a single case of a boar emitting strong taint at their plant. Tönnies reports 96% of its boars not emitting any boar taint at all, with the remaining 3-4% emitting only light to medium levels of taint, according to human sniffers.

The Dutch slaughterhouse, Westfort, also slaughters boars and has observed the same findings as Tönnies. Westfort slaughterhouse in the Netherlands has been slaughtering approximately 5000 intact boars per week since 2007. The boars there are slaughtered at six months old. The director of Westfort stated 97% of the boars they slaughter do not emit any taint. The remaining 3% emit an odour that could be detected by certain people, depending on their sensitivity (some people would detect the odour, others not at all). The Westfort director estimates only 1 - 1.5% emits a strong smell -- an odour most people would detect.

In summary, recent scientific research and industry results show previous beliefs about boar taint are not accurate, and the true incidence is very low.

### **Boar taint is easily detected at the slaughterhouse**

As the information above shows, the actual number of boars emitting boar taint (at the typical slaughter age and weight in the Netherlands and Germany) is very low, and is manageable. Tönnies and Westfort slaughterhouses have not experienced difficulty identifying carcasses that emit taint. The detection method is simple – a fatty part of the carcass is quickly heated and

professional “sniffers” smell it to detect whether any taint is emitted. The slaughterhouses are confident they can, with 100% certainty, identify boar taint this way.

These slaughterhouses promise their supermarket and other retail clients they will not receive complaints from customers about boar taint. COOP, a large Dutch grocery chain, and the first to stop selling pork from uncastrated males, has been selling boar meat from Westfort slaughterhouse since May 2007 without any customer complaints.

### **Consumer reaction**

According to several scientifically-run taste tests, the average consumer does not detect boar taint when it is low level. From a report of the University of Wageningen in the Netherlands in 2008, (*GBC Backus, Beren op de Weg, Wageningen UR, March 2008*) as well as a study conducted in Switzerland (*Bee and Piccinali, Beliebtheit von Eberfleisch bei Schweizer Konsumenten, Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, August 2006*), consumers could not detect a taste difference between boar meat without boar taint and boar meat with low amounts of taint.

The University of Wageningen study found:

*“...looking at the results, we can conclude that, among the Dutch consumers in the study, there was no preference in taste between pig meat from castrated male pigs, and pig meat from intact males with low levels of androstenone, skatol and idol.”*

The Swiss study found:

*“...that in comparison with meat from castrated male pigs, the boar meat was equally rated in taste, smell and overall quality.”*

The chance a consumer will come into contact with tainted boar meat is extremely small, since boar taint is not common and the detection method is 100% reliable.

### **Economics**

There are economic advantages to not castrating. Intact male pigs grow faster, produce less manure, require less food, are healthier, and require less medical attention and work from the farmer. In Europe, farmers who have stopped castrating spend €7 (\$11.20 Cdn) less in feed per boar (depending on feed cost) since boars grow faster, have leaner meat and less fat. Savings from the labour to castrate, provide less medicine, and dispose of less manure in the Netherlands and Germany save producers €15 (\$24 Cdn) per boar.

The cost of boar taint detection the slaughterhouse is less than €2 (\$3.60 Cdn) per boar. Carcasses with boar taint are put with other pig meat destined for pre-cooked products such as cold cuts, salami, sausages, etc. Through cooking, the meat loses its odour completely, and no meat is wasted.

## **Animal welfare**

Public concern about the pain of surgical castration is increasing. Norway is banning pig castration in 2010, and Switzerland will do the same in 2011. European retailers are specifying pig meat from intact males (see Appendix I). Castration can no longer be justified since continuing to castrate causes unnecessary animal suffering now that slaughter of intact boars has proved practical.

Here in Canada, the new (2009) *Canadian Council on Animal Care guidelines on the care use of farm animals in research, teaching and testing* recommends, “Castration of piglets should be avoided wherever possible.”

## **Role of grocers**

Grocers have a key role in determining whether pigs are castrated or not. If grocers specify pig meat from castrated males, then producers will continue to castrate. But if grocers specify meat from intact boars, producers and slaughterhouses will meet the demand. Dutch supermarkets provide a good example, because several large grocery chains stopped asking for castrated pork products. Currently,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of all male piglets sold by Dutch supermarkets (approximately 700,000 per year) are not castrated. By 2011,  $\frac{2}{3}$  of male piglets in the Netherlands will not be castrated since Albert Heijn, the largest Dutch supermarket, will end selling meat from castrated pigs.

When grocers sell meat from castrated pigs, they are accountable for unnecessary suffering to animals, in addition to the economic loss to farmers. However, when they sell intact-boar meat, they are credited with an important animal welfare improvement and an economic gain to producers.

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Appendix I

**Retailers, distributors and slaughterhouses that have switched  
to selling meat from intact male pigs**

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***Dutch grocers***

COOP  
Super de Boer (Super Farmer)  
ALDI (NL)  
LIDL (NL)  
PLUS  
JUMBO  
HEMA  
Albert Heijn (starting in 2011)

***Dutch restaurants***

McDonald's (McDonald's Germany is also switching in 2011)  
HEMA  
Center Parcs  
Laplace  
Van der Zee/Hanos Wholesale

***Dutch wholesale distributors and butcher chains***

Groothedde  
Van Loon  
Keurslager

***Slaughterhouses providing Dutch markets with boar meat***

Westfort (in Gorinchem, NL)  
Tönnies Fleisch (in Rheda-Wiedenbruck, Germany)  
Tönnies Fleisch (in Weissenfeld, Germany)  
Tönnies Fleisch (in Sogel, Germany)