

FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD

~ SOW STALLS ~

Sow stalls (also known as gestation crates) are designed to keep as many pregnant pigs as possible in an enclosed space.

OVERVIEW

The “stall” or “crate” keeps **pregnant sows** confined for their adult lives. The stalls are metal barred cages about two feet wide by seven feet long. They are so small the sow cannot turn around. Instead, her movement is limited to a step forward or back. The sow must eat, sleep, urinate and defecate in this tiny space. The waste falls through slatted concrete floors to a pool of raw sewage beneath her.

LIFE SENTENCE ON THE FACTORY FARM

Approximately 1.5 millions sows were kept in Canada in 2008 -- the vast majority in crates. In 2008, about 21.5 million pigs were slaughtered in Canada, and almost 2.3 million were exported to markets abroad.

Farmers say they treat their animals well, yet there is overwhelming evidence that sow stalls severely compromise sow health and welfare.

The 1997 Report of the European Union’s Scientific Veterinary Committee, *The Welfare of Intensively Kept Pigs*, was clear in its condemnation of sow stalls. It stated that sow stalls presented “serious welfare problems” and “sows prefer not to be confined in a small space.” Furthermore, the report added that “[the committee] find[s] the confinement offensive.”



Sow Stalls

THE PAIN OF PREGNANCY

Just before the sow is due to give birth, she is moved to another restraining device – the **farrowing crate** – where she gives birth and nurses her young through metal bars. Due to genetic selection for large litters, sows often birth more piglets than they have teats to feed. These piglets are called “shakers” and are “PACed” – that is, “Pounded Against Concrete”, to kill them. After anywhere from 10 to 21 days of nursing, the sow’s piglets are removed. She is then artificially inseminated, and the process is repeated, pregnancy after pregnancy. Typically, a sow has about 2.2 pregnancies a year, producing 19 to 22 pigs annually. A sow has an average of only three litters before her productivity wanes and she is sent to slaughter at age 24 to 30 months. She will spend nearly all her short, grim life inside a crate.

PHYSICAL AILMENTS

Prolonged confinement affects the sow’s health and fitness, causing lameness, foot injuries, weakened bones and painful abrasions. Poor levels of cardiovascular fitness causes some sows to die when they are transported.

The small confines of the sow stalls do not allow for the sow’s natural behaviour. In nature, pigs like to forage and root for food; they can spend six to eight hours a day doing that. Even well-fed domestic pigs in a semi-natural environment will forage and explore. Such behaviour is impossible on concrete floors in sow stalls.

Deprived of their natural behaviours, sows will perform pointless, repetitive motions such as bar-biting or attempting to root at the barren floor. Experts regard these behaviours as clear signs of animal suffering.

TRANSPORTATION

In Canada, pigs may be legally transported up to 36 hours in all weather, without water, food, or rest. Sows being exported are transported additional hours, still without concern for their thirst, hunger or physical state. Sows are particularly vulnerable to rough handling during transport as they are often slow-moving from ailments caused by a life of confinement, such as severe leg and joint injuries, as well as respiratory and heart problems.

ALTERNATIVES TO SOW STALLS

The reason producers use sow stalls is simple: economics. Sow crates are a way of keeping large numbers of breeding animals in a small space, saving on building costs. Because the sows are individually penned, they are easy to care for, requiring few special skills from hog barn workers. Food and water are dispensed to the animal “production units” mechanically and on an individual basis. And of course, less food is required to maintain an animal that barely moves.

An alternative that is both productive and more humane is **group housing**. In this type of housing, groups of pregnant sows can roam freely around an open pen or barn, ideally with suitable bedding material, such as straw. Group housing is being used successfully by some hog producers in Canada and around the world.

The pork industry argues that stalls prevent sows from fighting. When sows are housed together, it is important to give them enough space so a more submissive sow can turn aside to avoid a fight. Overcrowding is a basic management mistake. New sows should be introduced in groups rather than individually.

Sows living in groups have improved health and fertility compared to sows in crates. They have fewer leg problems, an easier time birthing and fewer teat infections. **The Research Institute for Pig Husbandry** in the Netherlands has reported the same number of weaned piglets per litter is produced in group housing as in sow stalls.



*Sow in a group-housing environment
Photo Courtesy of Farm Sanctuary*

GLOBAL PROGRESS

Starting in **2013**, the prolonged use of sow stalls will be banned in the **European Union**. Some European countries are moving away from sow stalls faster than the legislation requires. Sow stalls are already banned in **Great Britain, Sweden** and **Denmark**. **Finland** banned crates in 2006, **the Netherlands** in 2008. Similar legislation has been passed in **the Philippines**. In Australia, the state of **Tasmania** has committed to a phase-out of sow stalls by 2017, and **seven U.S. states** -- including Michigan, Arizona, California and Florida -- banned sow stalls through voter ballots, while Maine, Colorado and Oregon banned stalls through state legislative initiatives.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There is clear scientific evidence that sows suffer greatly while housed in sow stalls. The **Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals** is working to end the suffering caused by sow stalls, and to eventually ban sow stalls in Canada. You can help make a difference.

- Eliminate, or reduce, the amount of pork that you eat, and replace with plant-based protein-rich foods, such as tofu and beans.
- Don't buy pork produced in factory farms using sow stalls. Choose free-range pork that is *Certified Organic* or certified with higher welfare standards such as BCSPCA Certified.
- Ask your local grocery store to stock alternatives to factory-farmed meat and to ensure that these alternatives are clearly labeled.
- Write to your federal and provincial government representatives asking for a ban on sow stalls.

For more information, please contact us.

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