

Updated: 10 September 2024

BRIEFING NOTE: Farrowing Crates

Issue

- Scottish Government made a manifesto commitment to consult on proposals to ban the use of farrowing crates in Scotland. It has featured in the past two programmes for Government alongside similar commitments to ban the use of cages in egg production.
- A consultation on proposals to ban the use of cages in egg production took place earlier this year and we expect a similar consultation looking at proposals to ban the use of farrowing crates in pig production will be issued later this year.

Background

There is growing pressure on Government to ban farrowing crates for pigs, a recent Westminster Bill called for a ban by 2027. Whilst unsuccessful the Bill claimed ‘numerous alternatives’ exist that offer better welfare for the sow and delivering piglet mortalities equivalent to those achieved in crates.

NFUS believes that although there has been significant progress made in the development of alternative farrowing systems, claims that true ‘freedom farrowing’ systems can deliver low piglet mortality rates are misleading. True ‘freedom farrowing’ systems still result in increased mortality in piglets and are a health and safety risk for workers trying to intervene and carry out vital husbandry tasks during those sensitive few days of piglet life.

The pig industry acknowledges the importance of improving conditions during farrowing and believe temporary confinement systems, adaptive farrowing, deliver the necessary welfare improvements for the sow, without compromising piglet welfare/mortality and helping protect stockmen working to give piglets the best start in life. Adaptive farrowing systems confine the sow for the first few days of the piglet’s life, protecting the piglets and stockpersons whilst they are most vulnerable, the stock person can then remove/open the crate, allowing the sow free movement with her piglets.

Freedom and adaptive farrowing systems require more space than traditional farrowing crates. For Scotland’s pig sector to adopt new systems they would require a significant increase in shed space and significant investment in new sheds and refurbishments.

The barriers are not just financial, the sector already experiences serious issues with planning for new sheds and conversions. They would require support from Government and local authorities to help overcome these issues if they want industry to make these changes.

The upfront investment from industry to make these changes would be considerable and will require industry to have confidence in the future market to justify such sizeable investments. This would take commitments from retailers and customers to pay more for pork products without undercutting the industry with cheaper imports produced to lower standards.

The sector’s experience from 1999, when the UK banned the use of gestational stalls and tethers, 13 years ahead of the rest of Europe, demonstrated that price was more important, UK pork was undercut by imports and the UK industry halved as a direct result. Industry will not be prepared to make such significant investments without some level of guarantee for the sector that retailers and consumers will support the sector.

NFUS Activity

- Engage with Scottish Government animal welfare team and Ministers to highlight the value of adaptive farrowing over full freedom farrowing for piglet welfare and health and safety purposes.
- Highlight that the industry is fully supportive of alternative farrowing systems. Change is already happening, given a suitable phase in period and support, industry will get there without legislation.

NFU Scotland's position is as follows:

- Industry is already moving towards alternative farrowing systems and new buildings will all have adaptive farrowing in mind. It is not necessary to ban farrowing crates it would be more productive to support industry efforts to change a existing buildings are replaced.
- Adaptive farrowing options must be recognised as delivering the best balance for welfare of both the sow and the piglets, as well as allowing stockpersons to safely monitor and intervene and help piglets during the most vulnerable first few days of life.
- Government must consider the availability of suitable sites and planning restrictions as part of their support for industry development.

Next Steps:

- Meet with Scottish Government officials ahead of any consultation process to help shape early thinking.
- Brief MSP's and MP's on our support and concerns around adaptive farrowing.

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