

Food Safety and Processing Perspective Subscribe

Terrence O'Keefe, WATT's content director of agri-business, provides his perspective on developments affecting processing and food safety related issues in the poultry, egg and swine industries. Terrence has covered the poultry industry as an editor for over a decade and also brings his experience in plant management and live production to bear on today's issues.

Housing systems should be designed around the animal

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If your primary concern is housing the most laying hens or sows in the least amount of space, you probably won't get the desired results

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Just as egg producers are housing more cage-free hens, many pork producers are switching from gestation stalls to group pens for housing pregnant sows. The driving force for both of these transitions is purchase pledges by major foodservice retail customers.

Joel Phelps, pork producer, Great Lakes Pork, described the conversion of his operation's sow housing from gestation stalls to group sow housing recently at the World Pork Expo in Des Moines, Iowa. Speaking at the New World of Technology for Pork Producers Symposium, sponsored by Maximum Ag Technologies, he said that if he were to start a new operation from scratch – with no customer requirements regarding how the sows were housed – he would use the group housing system Great Lakes developed. The performance of the sows is as good as with gestation stalls, and the sows don't appear to be stressed.

The key to this success was the approach Great Lakes took to the conversion. The emphasis was placed on minimizing stress and providing a housing system that allowed the sows to avoid confrontation. The focus wasn't on maximizing the number of head per square foot, per feeder or per waterer. Instead, the design centered on placing all of the resources in the pens in a manner that minimized conflict between sows. The result is a system that costs a little more, but avoids performance issues.

Greater freedom of movement for laying hens and sows may or may not provide tangible welfare benefits for the animals, but it definitely presents a husbandry challenge for producers. My guess is that minimizing stress and aggressive behavior for the animals will yield better performance than maximizing the number of head per square foot.

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