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Swine Newsletter
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Breeding Efficiency

This is a good time of year to really take a pig farms breeding management and strategies into consideration. Why? Because during the summer breeding efficiency often falls off and then there aren't enough farrowings during late autumn and early winter. We call this seasonal infertility. It can be very costly because the piglets that weren't born can't be going to market next spring and early summer - the time of year when profits are usually highest!

Why does this happen?

- Cropitis! We all prefer to get outside.
- The heat! Sows don't eat as much during lactation if temperatures go above 77°F. They milk off their fat rather than the groceries in the trough. Then they wean off in a negative plain of nutrition and have poor reproductive performance.
- Lack of breedings, more repeat services, etc.
- Summer holidays and a laid back attitude among staff during the warm summer days.

I've been over how to combat seasonal infertility in previous newsletters.

- Good ventilation
- Drip coolers over farrowing crates, on a timer and thermostats.
- Increased gilt pool and more gilt breedings.
- Overbreed/cull later after preg checks.
- Get to the barn earlier in the day.
- Increase energy density of the rations

Reproductive efficiency can be measured in several different ways and all can have a major impact on a swine operation's profitability. But in many situations it is best to focus on only a few very important reproductive targets.

One measurement of reproductive performance that clearly influences overall profitability is farrowing rates. In other words, how efficiently is the sow herd being utilized? This in turn has a direct impact on other key reproductive and profitability factors – like pigs/sow/year and farrowing crate utilization.

If your herd isn't on a computerized system then it should be. It is just amazing how much we can learn about the herd with computer records that we can't if using a manual paper system. For instance, "average non-productive sow days", is a very useful gauge of herd efficiency and I've never known anyone not using a computer that can generate that number.

Also, if you are using a computer, are the records being fed into the computer regularly (each week)? Is the system up to date? If it is a month behind, or if there are excuses for not being able to generate up to date records then I suspect that breeding efficiency, and/or reproductive performance is compromised.

Accurate Heat Detection requires that procedures must be in place to check sows for signs of estrus frequently and accurately. Most consultants recommend performing heat detection twice daily, but if employees are dedicated and thorough, once per day systems can be effective – especially if performed early in the morning. The important thing is to have a systematic method in place that is followed by all employees, plus a method of recording observations. If heat checks are performed twice a day, experts say most sows should be inseminated or mated 24 and 36 hours after signs of estrus are first noted and again every 24 hours as long as they show a standing reflex. If females are checked for heat once a day, they should be bred each day they show a standing reflex. People responsible for reproduction need to be highly committed to 21-day heat checks and ultrasound testing for pregnancy. These protocols are nearly as important as post-weaning and first-service heat detection to high farrowing rates. Minimizing environmental and social stress during the first month or so after breeding is also extremely important. We don't want to disturb an early pregnancy. Many breeding experts think sows should not be mixed or moved during this time.

High Quality Services Are Another Must for successful breeding to result in pregnancy. One is the quality of the semen. Semen quality can be affected by collection techniques, processing and storage procedures. Corners can simply not be cut on cleanliness or temperature control when it comes to semen handling. Decisions on extending semen should be based on sperm cell concentrations, not how many females need to be inseminated. Impress upon employees that inseminations are not a chore they can hurry through.

Don't overlook the importance of sow nutrition, especially during the previous lactation. It's also essential to have an adequate supply of well-developed and acclimated replacement gilts available to add to the breeding herd.

Good People Are Essential for success. The single most important factor in any breeding system is the people doing the work.

Good breeding technicians are willing to give consistent attention to details. It takes precision, patience, confidence, curiosity and enthusiasm to excel in this phase of production. Aspects of breeding management that require a high level skill, knowledge and motivation include estrus detection, artificial insemination and semen handling.

It is also essential that management foster teamwork. Good communication is something all outstanding breeding teams possess. Accurate records and a system to let other workers know what's going on are absolute musts. This is especially true when it comes to heat detection. Accurate records are also a must for keeping track of how frequently boars are collected or used for natural service. One way to promote teamwork in the breeding barn is to share the workload as much as possible. Impress upon all employees that even seemingly minor tasks can have a huge impact on reproductive performance if not done correctly.

Enjoy the summer time! We've been waiting for it all winter.