

'Pig whisperer' urges an end to mega-barns

More freedom for hogs in Europe

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Dr. Kees Scheepens: 'Let pigs be pigs' (KEN GIGLIOTTI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)

The "pig whisperer" is trying to soothe an embattled hog industry in Manitoba.

Speaking at a panel discussion at the University of Manitoba on Thursday, Dr. Kees Scheepens, a veterinarian and sow farmer from the Netherlands, is an advocate for a less-intensive hog production system.

Dubbed the pig whisperer for his rather unique ability to 'communicate' with swine, Scheepens provided a European view on what the hog industry in Canada should aspire to look like, using his own backyard as the basis for his argument.

Scheepens said the Netherlands, a country of 16 million people and 12 million pigs, is a prime example of how a hog industry can work in conjunction with everyday life. There are some 2,500 non-corporate lots, with each farm containing about 400 animals.

On top of that, more than 75 per cent of those barns have made the move from a gestation stall configuration to a group housing, straw-feed system.

Smaller is better, according to Scheepens, and when you look at the environmental moves the Dutch have instituted over the years -- upgrades in both manure management and air washing to remove the smell -- while getting away from the mega-barn, his point gives local producers something to chew on. "How big does a company need to be?" he said. "Let's go back to a human size of industry and let's go back to a human size of farming. Let humans be humans and let pigs be pigs."

Vicki Burns, former director of the Winnipeg Humane Society who now oversees the Lake Winnipeg Watershed Initiative, wonders why the industry is waiting so long to make the switch.

"The problem is, when you keep any animal so confined for its entire adult life that it cannot even turn around, that is basically not humane," Burns said. "We don't need to make the argument any more complex than that."

That argument, however, comes with a high cost. At a time when Manitoba hog producers are stretched to the limit by a drop in animal prices and any consumer fallout to a swine flu epidemic, moving away from gestation crates is next to impossible.

Marg Rempel owns a small sow operation near Ste. Anne, and at any one time she'll have about 5,000 animals in her barns. She is open to the group housing system, but changing over the stalls she has would cost roughly \$1,000 per unit, so making the switch right now is a major financial concern -- and one that simply isn't in the cards.

"The change is (determined) by financial viability to move in that direction," she said. "For me to exist, I still have to be able to pay the bills."

In Canada, major producers (Smithfield, Maple Leaf) have announced they are phasing out the gestation stalls by 2017, perhaps making way for smaller, more humane barns in the future.

The movement towards a more wide-open space for hogs is already underway around the world. In Europe, all 27 countries have started the process to get rid of adult gestation stalls by 2012 and in the United States, individual jurisdictions have begun phasing out the stalls before the end of the decade. Major food service companies (Safeway, McDonald's) have announced they will be buying more of their meat from farms that do not use the confinement crates.

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