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Summary Nuffield research question

How do we bring the tail back to the pigs?

At the start of my Nuffield scholar ship I am consciously aware that in the Netherlands we have a societal problem with the intervention of pigs to cut the tails. Almost 95% of all 17 million pigs present in the Netherlands are tail docked. This is to prevent cannibalism in the current farming system.

In the Netherlands pig farmers are only allowed to dock tails of pigs in the first 3 days of their life. If they are older only veterinarians are allowed to do this. This happens for almost 99% with a red-hot knife and thus immediately seals the wound.

To elaborate my study, I had formulated the following research questions:

- 1: Under which circumstances and places all over the world is tail docking possible and what are the circumstances and conditions under which this takes place?
- 2: Is it possible in Europe to keep pigs with a curled tail?
- 3: What are the possible additional costs for leaving a curl tail on the pig without welfare problems intact?
- 4: Do the societal organizations find docking tails in pigs an insurmountable problem ?

Experiences on a journey

While traveling through countries such as Brazil, England, Scotland, Poland, East and West Germany, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark and Spain, many contacts have been made with pig farmers. My intention was to collect "tools" from practical people such as farmers to describe a kind of 'Toolbox' at the end of my study, with which we can also start working in the Netherlands.

The pig farms and people we spoke to in Brazil immediately indicated that stopping with tail docking in the Brazilian pig sector was not possible. Cannibalism was a big problem there. Practical pig farmers I talked to found interventions normal and they think it will also remain normal.

In Europe there are countries such as Finland and Switzerland where there has been a docking ban for years. This is one of the reasons why I have been touring in these countries for several weeks, and have visited farmers to understand how they dealt with the matter.

The final conclusion was that Switzerland (as almost organic pig farm country) has no problems, because of the extra space and straw in all stables. In Finland it is different. The pig husbandry system in Finland is almost identical to the Dutch and we also saw many Dutch equipment systems and barn builders. The Finns have a higher health status and use the so-called two climate systems combined with good distraction material (such as paper or organic material). A kind of creep where it is hot and a manure and feeding place where it is fresh (about 10 degrees difference). After several talks with pig farmers I also learned that feed composition and frequency of feeding (at least 6 times a day to the trough) are key conditions for retaining the tail.

In West and East Germany you see the same conditions as in the Netherlands. East German larger farms report that the problems with tail biting also arise in the period after weaning, especially in the 2nd or 3rd week. In the period from 23 kg onwards, there are often fewer problems. It is remarkable that breeding material often holds a long tail but other animals are all docked.

In England I visited different types of farms. Outdoor farms have no problems with tail biting and also spacious pens with organic distraction material provides solutions for tail biting. Larger indoor farms dock tails just like in other European countries.

Certified organic farms in the Netherlands and Germany are not allowed to dock tails, and despite the fact that it is reported in professional magazines that sometimes even tail-biting takes place, I have not been able to see and confirm this myself. Even in discussions with organic pig farmers, maintaining the tail of organic pigs is only perceived as positive.

At our own farm we have tried out some applications where socializing piglets also had a positive influence on keeping the tail. We have also developed various situations with a so-called "Pignick". Where piglets have an undercut in artificial grass and extra loft area on "the 2nd floor"

Extra costs of tail

In order to get an idea of the additional costs of the measures to prevent pigs from biting, you have to understand that this depends on which husbandry system is used. It is compulsory for organic pig farms and, in general, no extra measures are required. For farms with a limited loft area and necessary adjustments, the costs can amount to as much as 30 euros / weaned piglet or 40 euro/fattening pig. In particular the variable costs of adding play equipment and adjusting to a two climates system are very high.

In the market it appears that in Sweden for pork 15 euro / pig more is paid for a pig with a long tail. In Germany, a market concept has been created for this which shows that there is great interest.

Desire from the consumer

In discussions with consumers, butchers, supermarkets and various animal welfare organizations, it appears that nowhere in the world outside the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands there is a problem with docking the tails. In these countries pig farmers are often described in the media as almost criminals. Often here is a piece of ignorance at the basis of the consumer and fed by animal welfare organizations. When consumers see a curled pig, it is labelled as a healthy pig and is perceived as positive.

To be able to create a measurable system of animal welfare, the measurement of Cortisol in the saliva is possible.

Toolbox for pig farmers

To support pig farmers in finding the way of how can I give the pig the tail back I make the following recommendations.

- 1: Create a two climates system
- 2: Feed the trough at least 6 times a day
- 3: Prevent stress (no plastic grids)
- 4: Increase tryptophan and crude fiber% in feed
- 5: Give 50% more loft area
- 6: Give organic bedding or play material
- 7: Let pigs get used to each other as little piglets
- 8: Use high health status by preventing diseases
- 9: Extra attention period around the 40th day of life
- 10: Put the "Tailbite Pigs" separate

When someone wants additional information, contact can always be made with;

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