

Weaning large litters
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Modern sows are much more prolific than older genetics and the average number of liveborn pigs per litter is now between 12 and 13 on many farms. While farrowing a large litter is the prerequisite for being able to wean a large litter, farrowing a large litter does not guarantee that a large litter is also weaned. The increase in liveborn pigs sometimes is associated with an increase in pre-weaning mortality resulting in no increase in the number of weaned pigs per litter. It is, therefore, important that pre-weaning mortality is kept low as the number of liveborn pigs is increased. A few simple steps can help reduce pre-weaning mortality.

Litter standardization

When a group of sows have farrowed there are usually sows with small litters and other sows with very large litters. It is common practice to standardize the litter size among sows so that all sows have the same number of piglets. While this is a necessary practice, it is important that no pigs are moved from one sow to another until it is at least 24 hours old. The importance of sufficient intake of colostrum from the mother of a pig cannot be overemphasized. It is also important that as few pigs as possible are moved. Research has shown that all pigs that are moved from their mother to a different sow will have a reduced weaning weight compared with pigs that are nursed by their mother. Pig movement, therefore, should be kept at a minimum although it is impossible to avoid it.

Nurse sows

If the average number of liveborn pigs in a group of sows exceeds the capacity of the sows to nurse the piglets, some of the pigs may be raised by a nurse sow. In this case, pigs from a sow that farrowed 16 to 18 days earlier are weaned, and the extra pigs from the newly farrowed sows are given to this sow. A second to fourth parity sow with excellent milk yield should be chosen as a nurse sow and only piglets that are at least 48 hours old should be moved to the nurse sow. If executed correctly, this practice can help reduce pre-weaning mortality and increase the average number of weaned pigs per litter. However, it does require extra work and movement of sows and it is, therefore, something that should be done only if absolutely required.

Sow feed intake

The most common reason for pig mortality during lactation is starvation. To avoid starvation, it is important that sows have high levels of milk yield that will enable them to feed a large litter. Most modern sows have capacity for milk yield that will satisfy the

needs of 12 piglets if they are fed a balanced diet in sufficient quantities. To maximize feed intake, the sow needs a readily accessible source of clean water – lactating sows will drink up to 10 gallons of water per day. The average feed intake over a 21 day lactation period should exceed 12 lb per sow per day - the best farms have feed intake of close to 15 lb per sow per day. This level of feed intake will usually be sufficient for the sow to maintain a high milk yield during lactation, which will enable pigs to survive.

Daily pig care

The daily management in the farrowing barn includes daily observations of all piglets. Some pigs are lost due to infections that might have been easily treated if diagnosed early. However, in too many cases, these infections are not recognized until they have reached a stage where they can no longer be treated. Early diagnosis of sick pigs, tailenders, and starved pigs is imperative if mortality is to be kept low.

Benchmark for pre-weaning mortality

It is not possible to completely eliminate pre-weaning mortality, but with good management and care, preweaning mortality can be kept at a low rate, which will ensure that large litters are weaned. As a rule of thumb, pre-weaning mortality should not exceed 10% of the liveborn pigs regardless of the number of liveborn pigs in the litter. If a greater pre-weaning mortality is observed, it indicates poor management and more focus should be placed on this area.