

Editorial: Writing on the wall for sow stalls

4:00 AM Monday May 25, 2009

The Agriculture Minister, David Carter, wants to issue a new welfare code for pigs by the end of the year. This, indeed, may be necessary to prevent a sizeable drop in the purchase of Christmas hams this December. Such has been the public reaction to television pictures of pigs chewing at their cage bars, frothing at the mouth and unable to move that the minister had little option but to address the issue urgently. Pig farmers, for their part, will have to accept that sow stalls fly in the face of popular modern concepts of animal welfare and that their use will have to cease much earlier than they would have liked.



In fairness, only a minority have not seen the writing on the wall. Less than a third of the national breeding sow herd is farmed using these stalls. The balance are farmed free-range or in group housing pens. Most producers have taken note of animal-welfare developments, not least that sow stalls have been banned in Britain and Sweden and will be phased out in all other European Union nations by 2012. New Zealand started along a similar path 10 years ago with the passing of the Animal Welfare Act, which introduced codes governing farming practices.

Since then, the industry has mounted a rearguard action based, most rationally, on the view that the practice was essential if some farms were to remain economically viable. It has sought to give these farms as much time as possible to phase out sow crates. The campaign succeeded inasmuch as a new code, introduced in 2005, mentioned only a reduction in the use of the stalls over 10 years. By the start of 2015, the maximum permitted confinement was to be four weeks after mating.

All that work has, however, now been undone by the television exposure. It has rendered the industry largely defenceless. Given the mental cruelty and more arguable physical harm to the pigs, that is not surprising. And even the defence of economics must now be open to question given that farmers in comparable jurisdictions are having to bear the cost of more humane practices.

It is, as the SPCA suggests, now very much in the industry's interest to adopt a labelling system so that shoppers can differentiate between pigs raised in crates and other pigs. Only if this is done will all farmers escape the popular odium directed towards the secretly filmed Levin farm. It will also test the depth of that feeling, if only because consumers who buy free-range ham and bacon will be required to pay more. Indeed, given that pigs – and intensively farmed battery hens – have been the prime targets of animal-welfare activists for many years, it is surprising such a step was not taken some time ago.

Introducing such labelling would at least have acknowledged an intensifying of the debate on what constitutes fair treatment of animals, both in this country and its biggest markets. Internationally, inhumane farming practices will be seized on by those eager to dent New Zealand's image. Closer to home, the outrage over the use of sow stalls is part of a continuum that has also seen jumps racing in Victoria brought almost to its knees. The state's racing industry has staved off the threat of closure by accepting changes designed to enhance the safety of the horses. But if more die, it will prove to be only a reprieve.

Pig farmers loath to abandon sow stalls are denying the reality of that trend. So will the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee if it does not revise the code so that the practice is banned in relatively quick order. As always, the final sanction lies with the consumer. More humane farming practices will cost producers. But if recalcitrance becomes the order of the day, shoppers are likely to slash even more dollars from the industry's profitability.

– [NZ Herald](#)

Copyright ©2015, NZME. Publishing Limited