



SwineTex
Consulting Services

Focus on the Sow

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I visited the farm of a new consulting client recently. When I'm working with a new client, I like to spend a lot of time talking to and observing the employees that work directly with the animals. I often find a disconnect between what management thinks is happening on the farm and what is actually happening. The key to getting results for my clients is often in understanding the reasons for that disconnect. I stood in a farrowing room for awhile and watched the employees work. They were very busy and active but after awhile I started noticing a trend; they spent most of their time working with and focusing on the pigs and virtually ignored the sows. They were so busy mixing up milk replacer, distributing creep feed, moving pigs from litter to litter and giving pigs injections that they didn't seem to have time to check on the sows. It's certainly important to care for the pigs but it is equally important, arguably more important, to care for the sow. While they were busily looking after the pigs, I observed several thin sows standing and banging on feeders with nothing to eat, a missed opportunity.

This is part of a trend I'm seeing that is worrisome, a lack of focus on sows in lactation. As litter sizes have increased, there has been an increased interest in products and management strategies to compensate for milk production that is seen as inadequate to meet the needs of large litters. While these tools can be very useful, sow's milk remains the best and most cost efficient way to provide nutrients to suckling pigs. Maximizing lactation feed intake, ensuring access to clean water, carefully monitoring and treating sows that need attention and effectively managing the environment for sow comfort are some of the most important activities on the farm because they offer the best return on investment.

In our rush to develop creative solutions to inadequate milk production, I believe we've lost sight of the importance of managing sows to improve milk production. The result, ironically, is poorer milk production and an even greater need to supplement nutrients for the litter. I'm not opposed to management strategies and products that help close the gap between nutrient needs and nutrient availability. I am opposed to implementing those strategies and products at the expense of good sow management. All farms, regardless of performance level, will benefit from better sow management. The advantages of good lactating sow management extend far beyond milk production and can have profound impacts on overall farm and system performance.

A full discussion of the usefulness of nutrient supplementation tools is beyond the scope of this article, but it's safe to say that these products and strategies are not the right answer for every problem on every farm and if they're implemented in inappropriate circumstances, they can be counterproductive. We often talk about farms that are achieving very high production levels, but the reality is that most of the farms in the world are producing litter sizes that properly managed sows should be able to feed with minimal supplemental nutrients and without the needs for elaborate management strategies. If we take care of our sows, they will be better able to take care of their pigs. I think just about everyone would agree that it's better for everyone if sows can provide a bigger share of the nutrients their pigs require.

About the Author:

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