Season 4, Episode 2: Gilt Eligibility and Sow Longevity

Jennifer Patterson, University of Alberta and **Matt Romoser**, Iowa State University, discuss the process of managing and selecting gilts for longevity, productivity, and fertility starting from birth to parity.

Background

Optimizing sow longevity and sow performance over a lifetime is principle for maximizing sow health, productivity, and performance efficiency of the breeding herd as well as its progeny. Traditionally, producers tend to focus on gilt selection at the time of puberty believing it translates directly to sow longevity, but data show that it's much more complicated than that. Many factors such as low birth weight, poor nursery management, late puberty, or even poor feed intake during lactation can all factor into the longevity of a sow. Overall, gilts are the basis of sow lifetime productivity and a strong gilt foundation drives good farm productivity now and in the future.

Gilt Development

Before gilts go into a developer unit, there are many post-farrowing management strategies that need to be thought out such as colostrum intake, cross fostering, and weaning age. Eliminating competition and increasing chances for growth can be significant. From there, the gilt development unit is a specialized sector on the farm that focuses on the care for gilts up to puberty. The goal is to give them all the tools they need to be successful such as puberty stimulation, heat detection, and boar exposure. In this episode, 4 main goals that define success in the development unit are discussed further. Those goals being age of puberty, weight at service, heat at service, and age at mating. Each of these goals have target criteria that we want out gilts to fall under that have been proven to impact their future productivity and longevity.

Industry Data

Most of us are aware that a low birth weight in piglets can be correlated with all kinds of different disadvantages, but did you know that it's related to gilt longevity and productivity? Research has shown that gilts born weighing less that 1 kg are considered non-replacement candidates and are more likely to be physiologically stunted, especially when factoring in the post-natal environment. Another piece of data that is essential to this topic is percentage of gilts that fall out after each parity. Right now, the industry is looking at 8-10% of gilts that don't make it to first parity, 14-19% that are lost between parity 1 and 2, and then subsequently 10-13% each parity after that. About 70% of these losses are due to culling.

Future Implications

Ultimately, selecting to maximize sow longevity and productivity begins at birth and continues through multiple parities. It is increasingly important that producers treat gilt development and productivity as a priority and take the time to develop their breeding herds, as it can be the deciding factor on how profitable your farm can be. As an industry, we hope to lower the typical loss between each parity to around 10% using management strategies from birth, puberty, and selection to name a few. And remember, you can't manage what you don't measure!

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