

Ross Mosteller  
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

### **Avoid Farrowing Follies**

Looking back on the years of news columns I've compiled, there is a notable absence of attention given to the porcine species. It's not due to a lack of interest in swine; in fact, those who know me best know I'm an old pig guy who's worked in purebred/show pig and commercial swine settings. In my lifetime I've seen nearly every family farm raise pigs, to the vertically integrated large production systems of today, but that doesn't mean there isn't a need to give some attention to pigs from time to time. Show pig farrowing season is in full swing, so a farrowing refresher seems timely.

Monitoring pregnant sows and gilts is very critical for a positive outcome for mothers and babies alike. During the last month of pregnancy, monitor body condition and feed a proper diet according to requirements. If it is necessary to deworm, this should be done three to four weeks before farrowing. Don't forget about a good vaccination program to prevent diarrheal and other diseases. About a week before the due date, wash the sows/gilts so they are clean when moved into farrowing crates.

When delivery starts, monitor labor to make sure the delivery progresses. Signs of labor include restlessness, nesting behavior or trying to find a suitable position in the farrowing crate or pen by heaping up bedding. Respiratory rate increases and sometimes will express open mouth breathing. Clear indications of impending farrowing are vulva softening/swelling, abdominal contractions, mammary gland development and finally milk let down, which usually within a day of farrowing.

The birthing process lasts anywhere from thirty minutes to four hours, with fifteen-minute intervals between piglets. It is not uncommon for two piglets to arrive closely together, one from each uterine horn. If delivery is not progressing, a sow is straining for thirty minutes with no piglet delivered, the cervix is not dilated, the piglet is too big for the birth canal, or the sow has not passed her placenta or afterbirth, help should be considered. Your veterinarian is always a good first call for delivery issues.

Tips to help increase the chances of pig survival and sow health include the following points. Clean mucus and membranes from the piglet's head with a clean cloth or paper towel. Gently insert a piece of straw (or similar item) a short distance into the nose to clear the nasal passage and induce the piglet to sneeze. Spray or dip the newborn piglet's navel with a seven percent tincture of iodine or chlorhexidine/alcohol drying agent to prevent navel illness. Check the sow's birth canal for piglet left in the uterus and for tears to the birth canal. Make sure the sow passes the placenta within a half hour after the last pig. Clean up afterbirth from the delivery site to reduce possible disease spread.

The first twelve hours after birth are the most critical period. Piglets are susceptible to hypothermia the first weeks of life, so piglets need supplemental heat from heat lamps or heating mats. Place piglets in a warm, clean, and dry farrowing crate with their mother. This allows newborns full access to colostrum to get the antibodies available for protection against diseases. Make sure the piglets are nursing within three hours after birth. If piglets are weak and not nursing, colostrum should be given, either by passing a small feeding tube or by a syringe.

Once piglets get started nursing, stay warm and aren't dealing with health challenges, they become rather self-sufficient and grow rapidly on mother's milk. Early processing procedures vary among operations but often include clipping needle teeth, docking tails, administering iron and other medication(s), identification of piglets/ear notching, and castration. The processing time ranges from the first few hours after birth to the first week of life, with an average of two to three days post farrowing being common. Make sure to follow proper procedures for these processes.

Penn State Extension has a good video series related to swine production that could be a good entry level resource for producers wanting to learn more <https://extension.psu.edu/raising-pigs-1-farrowing> Don't forget the K-State swine team is one of the best in the world and a wealth of information can be found at: <https://www.asi.k-state.edu/extension/swine/>