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Distinguished Visitor Award - Group Housing and Management of Sows

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I. Background

Tasmanian pig producers had identified a need for training in stockmanship and pig handling in order to improve pig welfare and working conditions for stock attendants. This need was identified through a training needs workshop and industry survey carried out in March 2007 which identified industry training needs for the years 2007 /2008. This resulted in an initial round of ProHand training in the state in 2008.

At the TIPA AGM in 2010, it was recognised that another round of workshops was required to update producers and to provide training for new employees and entrants to the industry and for abattoir workers who are responsible for the care and handling at abattoirs prior to slaughter. The emphasis on welfare training in the revised Pig Welfare Regulations was also seen as a driver to provide further ProHand training.

As a result of a Tasmanian budget decision on May 17th, funding will be provided to Tasmanian Producers assist the phase out of gestation stalls to the national industry voluntary standard by 2013. Producers will restrict the use of gestation stalls to 5 days post mating. At the time of planning and delivery of the workshop, this was one of four options being proposed in a Regulatory Impact Statement being developed for the proposed legislation, which was to ban the use of sow stalls from 2017 and restrict the use to 6 weeks post mating from 2014.

A workshop on available alternative systems to stall housing and issues around mixing and handling grouped sows was therefore developed to coincide with a ProHand Review Workshop on 13th April.

A session on sow reproduction was also included in the workshop. Sow reproduction was also relevant as a refresher for experienced producers and an introduction for new entrants to the industry who attended.

ProHand Abattoir (Pork) was delivered at the JBS Australia site at Devonport 8th February. It was agreed that a follow up was required to gain feedback on whether the learnings from the initial workshop had been implemented and sustained. A visit was planned to coincide with the Producer/ProHand/ Housing Workshop.

Graeme Pope is a pig consultant who specialises in the delivery of ProHand courses and operates a consultancy practice with a range of commercial pig clients. Graeme has taken a special interest in the relationship between stockperson attitudes and behaviour and pig herd productivity. This background made Graeme an excellent provider of the workshops, with both research and practical experience to provide producers with an update on the latest research results and commercial management practices.

Graeme has had over 30 years experience with the Australian pig industry and until June 2011 was a Principal Pig Industry Consultant with the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI).

2. The Purposes of the Course and Abattoir Review

The purposes of the “Professional Handling of Pigs” -ProHand- course and Sow Housing Update and Abattoir Review were to:

1. Improve stockperson attitudes and behaviour to pigs and their jobs
2. Improve stockperson job satisfaction
3. Train people in effectively identifying animal stress and handling animals in a way that improves welfare
4. Improve productivity and welfare and profitability in the pig industry
5. Provide recognition of training for compliance with Pig Welfare Regulations
6. Improve producer knowledge of group housing options
7. Provide an understanding of the sow reproductive cycle
8. Information sharing and problem solving between producers
9. Reinforce and review the learnings from ProHand Producer and Abattoir workshops

3. Project Implementation

ProHand Abattoir

ProHand Abattoir (Pork) was delivered at the JBS Australia site at Devonport on Thursday 8th February. This site processes approximately 700 pigs per week, almost all the state’s pig kill apart from small local slaughterhouses.

Graeme Pope and Malcolm Cowan toured the facilities lairage and killing facilities prior to the workshop to familiarise themselves with the employees working conditions.

The program is designed to change the attitude of stock handlers towards pigs by showing them the way pigs react when being moved; how they are reactive to negative behaviour such as slaps and hits, how they react to changes in light and surfaces in passageways etc, how they are curious and investigative and the dynamics of pig groups with leaders and followers etc.

Although pigs may be pre-conditioned by on-farm treatment prior to arrival at the lairage, the behaviour of drovers and slaughtermen and the physical arrangement of pens and ramps can affect the smooth movement of pigs through the lairage.

Stressed and poorly directed pigs react negatively to being moved, making hard physical work for stockmen and reducing meat quality. The use of handling boards is critical to aid moving pigs and to reduce OH and S issues for handlers.

The reaction to the course by JBS Staff was extremely positive. Email feedback received from the QA manager Billy Rootes after the course indicated that the handlers have a greater appreciation of the requirements of pigs to move more easily, more time is being taken to allow pigs to move at their own pace and stock handling boards have been introduced.

Certificates of Attendance were provided by APL to the six staff who attended.

A **follow up visit** was planned on with Graeme Pope on 12th April to coincide with the ProHand/ Group Housing Workshop on Friday 13th April. Unfortunately there was no pig kill scheduled for this day due to the Easter break. A visit was made by Malcolm Cowan on Monday 28th May.

At this visit Malcolm

- discussed the effect of the program with the site QA Manager Billy Rootes and staff
- spent time in the lairage viewing handling techniques and equipment
- demonstrated the use of moving boards and assisted in moving pigs to the stunning box.

Outcomes

Discussions with staff and QA Manager indicated that they had generally taken on the messages and behavioural changes that are the aims of the ProHand program. The site is old and the lairage races are below ideal standards. The lairage is noisy, there is other abattoir activity continuing around the races and ramps used for moving pigs, the main ramp is portable and has changes in light and surfaces etc.

The skill and patience of the drovers is tested, particularly when under pressure to maintain a flow of pigs to the slaughtermen.



ProHand posters in lairage



Long reach pig mover

Despite all this, there appears to be a cultural change in regard to the attitude towards pigs and this is lead by the QA manager. ProHand Posters have been put up, long handled slappers/paddles have been made on site and a nil tolerance of bad welfare practices has been introduced.

Moving boards made on site have been made but at the time of the visit, these were underused. This was for two reasons:

1. The drover did not really understand how to use the board and
2. The board was too flexible , which allowed pigs to force back past the board.

To rectify this, the existing board was used to demonstrate the principal of using the board and to point out the failure of the potential of the board due to flexibility. The QA Manager agreed to make new stiffer boards.

It is well known that some lines of pigs are easier to move than others and this was demonstrated during the time in the lairage. One line of baconers were presented that were stubborn and

aggressive and unwilling to move freely up the ramp. This was despite the fact that previous lines had moved up the ramp very well.

This was a good example of the pressure that is created when pigs do not move freely; the pigs became stressed, slaughtermen became impatient and came back into the lairage to force pigs, which exaggerated the situation and some frustration occurred. This is apparently a regular occurrence with this line and the problem will be discussed with the producer involved.

The ProHand Producer course was held over two workshops.

Workshop #1 was held on 9th February. This day introduced the course and participants worked through the computer based program either individually or in pairs. The workshop program allowed for structured breaks for discussion of the training by the group.

Participants had no problem handling the computer based learning and were able to work through the program in at their own speed.

Workshop #2 was held on 13th April, five weeks after Workshop #1.

Workshop #2 is a Review Workshop and participants discussed the observations they had made of their own and other staff behaviour and attitude towards their pigs and the perceived levels of stress in their herds. The messages from Workshop #1 were reinforced and reviewed.

The following is a selection of the observations made by participants at Workshop #2.

“We now notice how little fear our pigs have - we have started to notice the low fear levels.”

It’s good to know the pigs aren’t stressed or fearful”

“I noticed that the stock attendant was observing animal behavior more.”

“The course makes you step back and think about any action you take, particularly whether it is needed or not.”

“We’ve now brought some boards and it’s much easier”

“I now pat the pigs more”

“I understand more about the pigs now”

“The boar got out of the paddock and we just quietly got him back with rushing about”

“Taking pig moving much more quietly”

Workshop #2 allowed for Graeme to provide an update on trends and options available for group housing of sows, including the options that producers may have to convert existing buildings. Graeme also highlighted areas where more research is required to resolve issues such as optimum group sizes, space allowances and shed configurations. This is a particularly relevant topic due to the

imminent changes to the Animal Welfare Regulations and the reduction of the use of individual housing.

9 farmers and 3 DPIPW Field Officers (Welfare Inspectors) attended Workshop #1 and #2 and received Certificates of Attendance for completing the course.

It was particularly relevant that DPIPW officers attended as they carry out welfare inspections on farm. They are now aware of:

- The training that producers undertake and what to look for as signs of good welfare on farm and
- The complexities around adapting and constructing new buildings to meet group housing requirements.

4. Project Assessment

All attendees agreed that the workshops had raised their awareness of the consequences of their attitudes and actions on the stress levels of stock (and operators) in their herds. A common theme of the comments was that they didn't realise the extent that even apparently negative behaviours, such as slaps, had on animal responses.

There was a general understanding that, although negative behaviours were at times required to assist in animal movement, it was critical that to achieve overall positive welfare and stress reduction, the number of positive actions must outweigh any negative behavior.

Feedback from attendees was very positive on the course content and the presentation. The material and information on group housing and reproduction provided in Workshop #2 was deemed to be useful and Graeme's presentation style was highly regarded as he was able to present complex concepts of housing and management in a format that was easily understood by producers.

Participants completing the ProHand course received a Certificate of Attendance and a set of ProHand laminated posters for use around the farm, emphasising the use of positive behaviour towards pigs.

5. Benefits to the Industry

The information provided on Group Housing was particularly relevant because of the political and market pressure developing on producers to adapt housing systems away from confined systems. Unfortunately the process around the decision to ban sow stalls in Tasmania did not provide any evaluation alternative housing systems. This workshop provided good information and a forum for discussion.

Comments and feedback from producers, abattoir staff and DPIPW officers indicated that the ProHand course had improved their understanding of the behaviour and values that affect the fear and stress levels in pigs.

The course reinforced many of the positive practices that they were undertaking and gave them a benchmark of the stress and fear levels in their herds.

For abattoir staff, new equipment has been introduced and a culture change is underway.

The courses and follow up are highly likely to improve the welfare of pigs in Tasmania; a total of 27 stock handlers, 6 abattoir staff and 3 DPIWVE Field Officers attended 2 series of Prohand Workshops in 2012. Staff from all the major intensive farms in the state attended.

The course also added to farmers' knowledge and understanding of group housing and the options available. Participants also benefitted from the exchange of ideas and experience within the group. Good relations have been developed with the JBS abattoir staff.

6. Recommendations to APL

1. It is recommended that the ProHand course be reviewed for content and operational update. The course had problems of crashing and not being able to "fast forward" to the point at which the crash occurred on re starting. This meant that individuals had to share with others who were continuing.
2. There is not sufficient demonstrations of good pig moving techniques, either in the Producer or Abattoir versions
3. The ProHand Abattoir course requires a Review similar to the Producer version. This was reinforced by my visit to the Devonport plant to review the learnings from the initial course and to discuss the practicalities of implementing the lessons and recommendations. A practical review of practices in the lairage is applicable.