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Managing Sows and Gilts for Efficient Reproduction

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

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# pork industry handbook

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE • MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Every producer should give the highest priority to management of females in the breeding herd to achieve maximum reproductive efficiency. Good management will pay dividends by increasing the number of live pigs farrowed. The more live pigs farrowed, the greater the likelihood that there will be more at market weight. The purpose of this fact sheet is to identify important points of reference in the reproductive life of the sow which respond to good management by yielding additional live pigs at farrowing.

### Prebreeding Management

**Gilt Management.** Selection of females for replacements is only the start of managing for highest reproductive efficiency. Gilts should be selected from family lines which have superior mothering ability. A good indication of the female's ability to function normally is whether she will start coming into heat at an early age. Gilts may start cycling as early as 5 months of age (Table 1). The general recommendation regarding age at first breeding has been to wait until the third heat to take advantage of any increase in ovulation rate. In total confinement, gilts not bred at first heat may stop cycling. The decision to breed on first or third heat should be based on more factors than the possibility of increasing ovulation rate by one or two eggs. Fluctuating prices for feed, labor and facilities, salvage values of breeding stock, marketing expectation, etc., can create situations that make it unprofitable to wait until 8 or 9 months of age before breeding gilts. Therefore, it is recommended that gilts not reaching puberty by 9 months of age be culled from the breeding herd.

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**Table 1. Puberty, estrus and ovulation.**

Age at puberty	5-8 mo.
Weight at puberty	150-250 lb.
Duration of estrus	1-5 da. (2 avg.)
Length of estrous cycle	16-25 da. (20-21 avg.)
Weaning to estrus	3-8 da. (5 avg.)
Time of ovulation	40 hr. (from onset of estrus)

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Mixing pens of confinement-reared gilts and regrouping them with direct boar contact at about 160 days of age is likely to start gilts cycling earlier than normal. This may help synchronize the first heat and, to a lesser degree, the second heat.

Seasonal differences in age at first heat are a widespread problem. In general, research has indicated that fall-born gilts reach puberty at a lighter weight and at a younger age than spring-born gilts. Boar exposure decreased age and weight at puberty in spring gilts but not in fall-born gilts. In a Canadian report an average of 9.7% of the gilts weighing 195-200 lb. that were slaughtered from June through September had reached puberty; whereas an average of 22.8% of gilts slaughtered from January through June had attained puberty.

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Anestrous conditions (absence of standing heat) may be the result of a number of conditions:

1. Faulty heat detection methods
2. Hot weather stress
3. Silent heat (ovulation with no visible sign of heat)
4. Sickness
5. Nutrition (lack of protein or energy)
6. Social stress

**Heat Detection.** Heat detection is critical and can be the cause of most problems. Heat is the time the female accepts the male for mating. A good method to detect heat is to bring a boar into a pen of females. The producer then should apply back pressure to each female in the presence of the boar. Females that are in "standing heat" will allow the man to sit on their back. They will respond by standing solidly and attempting to stiffen their ears erect (called "popping-their-ears"). If females do not stand solidly and pop their ears, they are not in heat. Particularly in gilts, the vulva may be swollen and/or nervousness may be noticed before and after standing heat.

**Effect of High Temperature.** High temperature (above 85 F.) will delay or prevent the occurrence of heat, reduce ovulation rate and increase early embryonic deaths. Michigan studies showed that gilts exposed to 104 F. for 2 hours daily from 1-13 days postbreeding can reduce embryo survival by as much as 35-40%. Other studies at Illinois and Oklahoma show similar results from heat stress. Animals also suffer heat stress when they get sick and have a fever. More variation in the length of standing heat can be expected due to hot weather. Not only does temperature have detrimental effects but decreasing length of days and relative humidity can also interact to multiply the problems a producer may encounter during the summer months. An individual producer must do a good job of selecting replacement breeding stock that are reproductively efficient under his management system to minimize the effects of heat stress.

The effect of heat on the boar's reproductive capacity is decreased sex drive and lowered sperm output. If rectal temperature increases as little as 1 F. for 72 hours, sperm production is decreased by 70% or more. Once sperm production is affected, normal sperm production is not attained for at least 4-6 weeks.

Keep group sizes to 15 or less if possible to minimize peck-order fighting and to help insure that all females receive their day's ration of feed. The use of individual stalls may prove to be economically feasible to cut down social stresses associated with the breeding herd.

**Sow Management.** Sows can and do occasionally come into heat while their litter is still nursing especially if lactation lasts beyond 5-6 weeks. If a sow does express heat while she is nursing, she may not return to heat within 3-7 days postweaning.

Selection for sows that do cycle within 7 days postweaning is very important to keep management schedules running smoothly. A number of producers use early return to heat as a prime consideration for retaining sows in the breeding herd. This criterion automatically selects a female capable of successfully contending with the stresses of living in a particular environment. If a sow fails to conceive within 28 days postweaning, she should be culled. This is enough time for her to have been bred twice. With each 21-day delay, the sow must produce 2 extra pigs just to pay for the extra labor and feed required. Similarly, if gilts do not conceive after being bred three times, they should also be culled so as not to increase the number of "hard breeders" in future generations.

If adequate nursery facilities are available weaning is recommended at 3-4 weeks of age so the sow can be returned to production as soon as possible. Results of one study conducted in England show a decrease of about 3 pigs per litter when sows were weaned and bred before

21 days of lactation. Weaning groups of sows at an average of 3½ weeks is usually a good practice to follow.

If postweaning scours are a problem, postpone weaning for another week or more; then leave the litter in the farrowing area an additional week. This will extend scours protection provided by the sow's milk. An extra week will allow additional time for the pigs to get started eating dry feed. Sows in thin condition should be on a high plane of nutrition and in a weight-gaining status before breeding. This will assure maximum ovulation rate as far as nutrient intake is concerned.

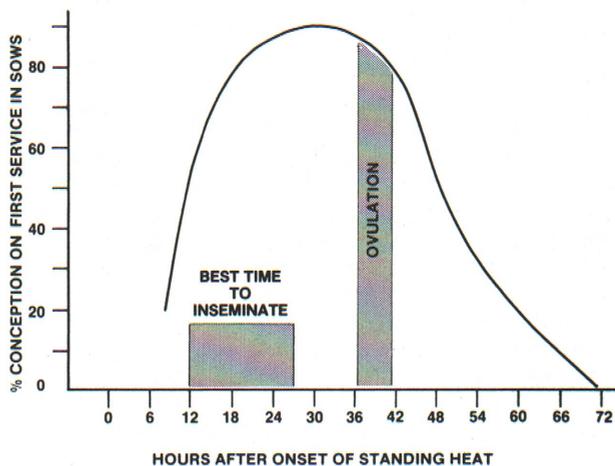
Synchronization of heat in sows is a relatively simple matter when pigs are weaned from a group of sows at the same time. A high proportion of sows that are in good physical condition will begin to come into heat within 3-7 days postweaning. Adequate boar power is essential for synchronization of postweaning heat to be effective. If your sows do not respond, analyze your production system and try to determine the cause.

There has been a lot of research reported on products designed to improve reproductive efficiency. However, to date none of the products is approved or available for commercial use.

**Herd Health.** Abortions, mummified fetuses, stillbirths and irregular estrous cycles are indicative of potential disease problems. In the past these symptoms were attributed to the SMEDI syndrome. Pseudorabies, parvovirus and enterovirus may also be responsible for the occurrence of mummies. There are no positive treatments for any of the viral diseases. Leptospirosis and brucellosis continue to cause significant losses to swine producers. Their symptoms can be inconsistent. Irregular cycles should raise suspicions regarding these infections and appropriate vaccination and blood testing can lead to their effective control. If there is any question about the health status of the breeding herd, consult with a veterinarian and review your herd health program.

## Breeding Management

The all-important factor in achieving a high conception rate and good litter size is to get sperm into the female's reproductive tract at the time when pregnancy rate and litter size will be maximized. Regardless of the method of breeding (i.e., pen mating, hand mating or artificial insemination), an adequate number of live sperm must be in the tract a few hours before ovulation occurs or conception rate and litter



**Figure 1. Effect of time of insemination on pregnancy rate in swine.**

size will be reduced, Figure 1 shows the effect on conception rate of breeding at various times in relation to occurrence of ovulation. Notice that when heat lasts 48 hours a female will ovulate 8-12 hours before the end of standing heat (37-40 hours after the onset of standing heat). When mating occurs too early or too late, conception rate drops very rapidly.

The general recommendation for optimal breeding is based on the number of times per day a producer checks the females for signs of standing heat. With once-a-day heat detection, breed the females each day they will accept a boar. With twice-a-day-detection, breed at 12 and 24 hours after they are first detected in heat. Heat detection should always be done in the presence of a boar to maximize the chances of detecting all possible females in heat. This applies specifically to producers using hand breeding or artificial insemination rather than pen breeding.

Abnormalities in the estrous or heat cycle do occur. Gilts will sometimes have less than a 2-day heat period. If this happens, they are most apt to ovulate shortly after going out of heat. If short heats are a problem, then gilts should be bred as soon as they are detected in heat and each succeeding 12 hours they will stand. When the period of male receptivity lasts longer than 3 days, chances are females may not conceive; so it is probably a waste of time and boar power to continue to breed her after the third day.

Producers using pen mating must use plenty of boar power. The ratio used by the most successful breeders is about 10 sows for each mature boar (over 1 year) per 21-day breeding period. Decrease that ratio to 4-6 sows for each young boar (less than 1 year). A sow-to-boar ratio of 4-1 for mature boars and 2-1 for young boars is recommended when sows are weaned in groups. When hand mating, the mature boar should not breed more than 2 females a day if he is to be used intensively for more than a couple of days, or the sperm reserve and sex drive can be decreased. Artificial insemination is extremely useful in this situation since it is possible to breed 10 or more sows with the sperm harvested from one ejaculate. When hand-mating in total confinement, using individual stalls during the first 30 days of gestation will significantly increase litter size and possibly conception rate during the late summer and early fall months.

An additional boost in conception rate and litter size can be obtained by using more than one boar on each female. This maximizes the chance that a highly fertile and compatible boar will be used on the female. It is easiest to accomplish when using hand mating or artificial insemination. This can be done when pen breeding by rotating boars at least once every day from pen to pen. Sex drive should be stimulated also.

The labor requirement is lowest for pen breeding. However, in most cases breeding dates are not known, so if one is to be present during farrowing, a greater amount of time spent in the farrowing house is required. Less is known about the mating performance of the boar or females; therefore, breeding problems such as bleeding, inability to couple properly and others are more likely to occur without being noticed. This makes it more difficult to keep accurate records of individual performance.

**Pregnancy Detection.** Pregnancy diagnosis has become a reality. With the ultrasonic detectors, a producer can find out with a 90-95% accuracy how many females have settled. These machines are most accurate and give the best return per dollar invested when they are used between 30 to 45 days after breeding. The economic advantage and accuracy drops off rapidly after 45 days.

Most producers do not remove open females from the gestation pens before 90 days. Assuming feed costs amount to 35-50¢/day for open or pregnant females, and that an average of 10% of all females bred will not con-

ceive, it costs about \$30 to maintain an open female between days 30 to 90 postbreeding. Therefore, a pregnant sow must produce 3 extra pigs just to pay for each open female's feed cost. On this basis a producer farrowing 300 litters per year can pay for a pregnancy testing machine within two years.

**Nutrition.** It is important that brood sows and gilts get the proper amount of nutrients for successful reproduction. Feeding in excess is not only wasteful and costly but may increase embryonic mortality. A limit-feeding system using balanced, fortified diets is recommended. It insures that each sow gets her daily requirements of nutrients without consuming excess energy.

As a rule of thumb, 4 lb. of a balanced ration will provide adequate protein and energy; however, during cold weather an additional pound of feed may prove beneficial, especially for bred gilts and thin sows. With limit-feeding it is extremely important that each sow gets her level of feed and no more. One of the following systems may be used to restrict energy intake of gestating females—daily individual limit feeding or interval feeding.

The daily feeding of a limited amount to each individual is the best system, and its success is based on having an adequate number of feeding stalls or space for individual animals. The individual stall is best because it prevents the "boss sows" from taking feed from slower eating or timid sows. However, individual feeding takes more labor if it is not mechanized. Self-feeding takes less labor but is the least acceptable method for two reasons: (1) it costs more to maintain sows, and (2) it is very difficult to keep females from getting too fat.

Keep sows and gilts separate during breeding and gestation to avoid injury that may cause death of developing embryos. Comfort and contentment of bred females are equally important in efficient reproduction. If gestating females are grouped, keep them in as small a group as is feasible for the facilities. The use of individual pens or stalls for gestation should be considered.

**Introducing New Breeding Stock.** Many producers bringing new breeding stock into their herd create situations that increase the herd health problems. This is done when new animals are not properly quarantined. All new breeding stock should be totally isolated for 30 days. Then during the next 30 days, start commingling by direct contact or reciprocal feeding of fecal material from the new livestock and open females only. In this way the new open females will be able to build an immunity to any new organisms they may encounter. If the new boar or gilts have a new virus and it gets into the bred females, all the signs of infertility mentioned previously may show up. In addition, near the end of the initial 30-day isolation, test mate boars to females to be culled to observe breeding ability. Use cull females so that if new organisms are present the effect will not be costly. Commercial producers should utilize their own females for replacements and upgrade their herd by bringing in new boars or semen.

### **Farrowing Management**

Be present when sows farrow, but do not offer any assistance unless necessary. Keep sows as calm and comfortable as possible. The average interval between births is approximately 15-20 minutes unless a problem develops. Producers with more experience in handling farrowing problems may assist the sow in trouble. If unable to help, consult a veterinarian as soon as possible. Keep the pen clean and remove all afterbirth. Make sure sows have plenty of fresh water. Check them closely and be sure they remain in good health and properly care for their pigs.

### **Records**

Records in swine production are essential. To keep accurate records, hogs must be identified. A good way to

identify individuals is by ear notching at farrowing. Figure 2 shows a good ear-notching system. If this system of notching does not have enough capacity, then consider using ear tags in addition to notches for gilts and sows.

Records should be kept on each sow and litter. Figure 3 shows an example of a sow record card. Data from individual record cards can be recorded into a permanent record book, and a summary prepared as a partial base for future selection of breeding stock.

Additional records are desirable in many circumstances to utilize boar power more efficiently and identify breeding problems early. Keep records of the frequency of boar services and, if artificial insemination is used, the date and volume of each ejaculate collected. A record of the date and duration of heat is essential for predicting when females will next be in heat, calculating dates for return to heat if conception does not occur, pregnancy

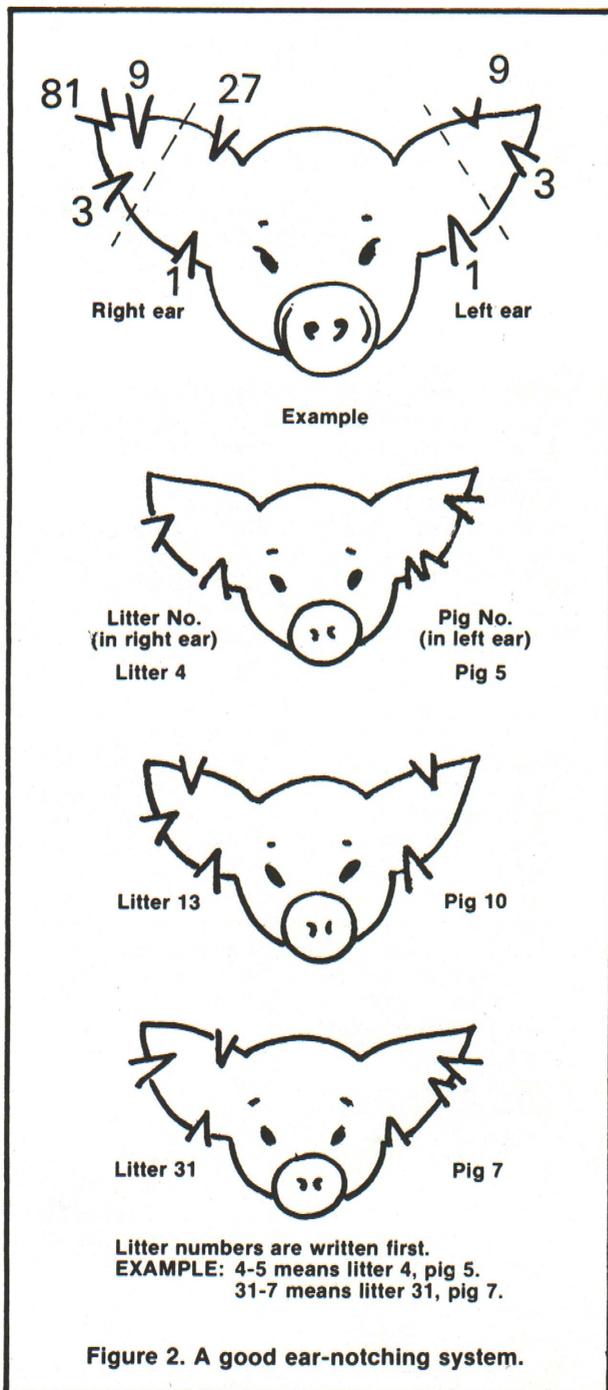


Figure 2. A good ear-notching system.

Figure 3. Sow record.

Sow number	_____
Sire number	_____
Breeding date	_____
Farrowing date	_____
Litter number	_____
Number farrowed	Live _____ Dead _____
Number transferred	_____
Weaning date	_____
Number weaned	_____
Weaning weight	_____
Farrowing problems	_____
Other	_____

checking dates, and the day to bring them into the farrowing house. Small computers are now becoming more popular for use in keeping, organizing and analyzing records.

### Summary

Gilts should be selected as replacements on the basis of their ability to come into heat at an early age and conceive within 3 heat periods after their first exposure to a boar. Sows should be selected on the basis of ability to conceive within 7 days after weaning or the earliest time that fits your management schedule. In addition, use of a sow productivity index as developed by the National Swine Improvement Federation is recommended as an added selection tool.

No matter how sperm are placed in the female's reproductive tract, they must be there a few hours before ovulation to maximize the chance of getting the best pregnancy rate and litter size.

During gestation gilts should be fed so they will gain about 75 lb. and sows should gain about 50 lb. Lactation should last 20-28 days to help insure that baby pigs get a good start and to insure a high rate of embryo implantation in the sow at the first postweaning heat. At farrowing, additional pigs will be saved if an attendant can be present. This also affords the opportunity to correct problems if they occur. Adequate records of individual performance during all phases of the reproductive cycle will be of benefit in upgrading the herd and making it more profitable.

### Related Publications

The following PIH fact sheets contain additional information related to swine reproduction.

- PIH-1 Management of the Boar
- PIH-59 Infectious Swine Reproductive Diseases
- PIH-64 Artificial Insemination in Swine
- PIH-68 Guidelines for the Development of a Swine Herd Health Calendar
- PIH-74 Management of Developing Gilts and Boars for Efficient Reproduction