Curly tails: The Dutch approach

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Background

The Dutch pig farming sector is working towards stopping tail docking. However, without additional preventive measures, tail biting will likely increase. Several parties have designed the Declaration of Dalfsen, containing a careful road map towards curly tails. This map comprises a demonstration project, including development of a toolbox and knowledge exchange.

Objective

The project aims at closing the gap between science and practice and relieving the anxiety and scepticism about keeping pigs with long tails in current systems. There is a focus on three points:

- Preventing an overload of the pigs that causes 'the bucket' of risk factors to overflow resulting in biting (see figure 1)
- Early signalling of problems (monitoring)
- Developing a toolbox of interventions in case of biting problems

Materials & Methods

In 2014 and 2015, every six weeks a batch of twelve undocked litters was included in the demonstration project. Circumstances that are considered as risk factors for tail biting (i.e. climate, feeding) were optimized as much as possible, and additional enrichment was provided.

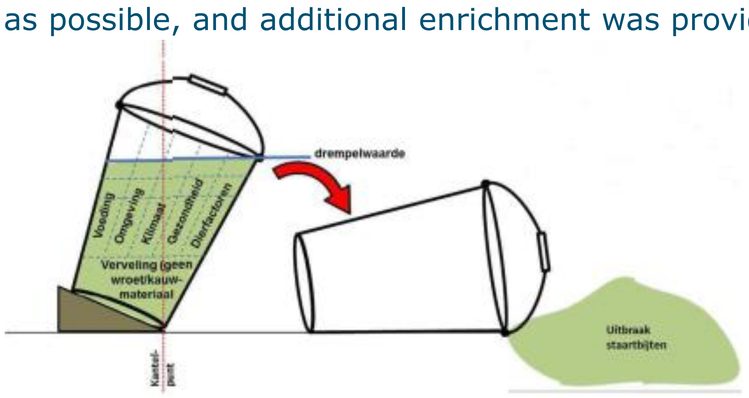

Figure 1. Bucket with risk factors for (tail) biting.

The possibility to keep pigs with long tails was explored using different preventive strategies, for example:

- Pens with fully slatted floors in the weaning compartment or pens with partly solid flooring
- Permanent enrichment (ropes, sack, long chain) or enrichment for all pigs twice a day (with roughage as straw, grass, silage)
- One feeding place or two feeding places per pen with 12 to 13 animals

Caretakers were instructed and coached on early signals of problems and curative measures in case of tail biting.

The different preventive strategies were judged on several levels:

- Pig; scoring bite marks and lesions of the tail
- Farmer; judging the applicability under practical circumstances
- Costs; calculating costs of materials as well as labour
- Possible benefits; calculating the technical performance of the pigs

Results

- Despite all knowledge and efforts, tail damage appeared. Mostly in individual animals, but incidentally also as an outbreak at pen level (for which predictive correlates are searched)
- Remarkably, at three weeks of age, several piglets already showed bite marks at the tail
- Attitudes of the caretakers changed during the year to a higher level of alertness and an active approach towards required management changes
- A traffic light system was implemented to safeguard attention towards groups at risk
- The use of some enrichment materials encountered practical problems, and labour required for adequate monitoring and providing materials was higher than expected
- The toolbox is still being further developed and tested, describing effective curative measures
- A network of farmers working towards keeping pigs with long tails was formed, to support exchange of knowledge and experiences

Conclusions

- During the first year researchers and animal caretakers developed a mutual understanding that enabled putting scientific knowledge into practice
- Caretakers increased their management skills towards long tails and increased their ability to recognize early signs of upcoming problems
- Biting behaviour can already start in the farrowing unit
- Costs and labour of keeping pigs with intact tails should not be underestimated
- Coaching, creating trust, transferring knowledge are essential in the process towards keeping pigs with long intact tails

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