Restricting the ability of sows to move: a source of concern for some Brazilians

MC Yunes†, MAG von Keyserlingk‡ and MJ Hötzel*†

† Laboratório de Etologia Aplicada e Bem-Estar Animal, Departamento de Zootecnia e Desenvolvimento Rural, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brazil
‡ Animal Welfare Program, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6T 1Z4, Canada
* Contact for correspondence and requests for reprints: maria.j.hotzel@ufsc.br

Abstract

Gestation stall housing for pregnant sows (Sus scrofa) has been, or is being, phased out in many parts of the world in response to public criticism. However, in Brazil, one of the largest global producers and exporters of pork, gestation stall housing is still common. The objective of this study was to explore the views of Brazilians, including participants associated (ALP) or not with livestock production (NotALP), on gestation stall housing. Participants were provided the option of accessing a short text describing the housing system and a video of pregnant sows housed in either individual or group housing. Participants (ALP; n = 176, NotALP; n = 173) were asked to state their position on housing pregnant sows in individual or group housing. Participants (ALP; n = 176, NotALP; n = 173) were asked to state their position on housing pregnant sows in individual stalls and to provide the reason(s) justifying their position. More NotALP (87%) participants than ALP (69%) participants rejected individual stalls. More participants (85%) that accessed the optional information rejected the stalls than those (71%) that did not. Qualitative analyses revealed that animal welfare, most often in reference to animal sentience, freedom of movement and ethics, was the main justification given for rejecting gestation stalls. Those in favour of individual stalls justified their position with statements such as improved production, handling and animal health, and reduced aggression. This qualitative, exploratory study, based on a convenience sample of participants, does not represent the views of Brazilian society; however, it identified some shared values between participants associated with livestock production and those that are not. Our findings highlight that opposition to gestation stalls for sows reflects an ethical position regarding the treatment of livestock and should not be interpreted as support for group housing in confined systems.

Keywords: animal welfare, gestation stalls, housing, pig production, public views, survey

Introduction

Throughout the world there has been growing public opposition to livestock production systems that citizens perceive as negative for the welfare of farm animals (Eurobarometer 2007; Centner 2010). One example is the case of gestation stalls, in which sows (Sus scrofa) are housed individually, unable to walk or turn around during pregnancy. Views’ and attitudes’ surveys suggest that the general public holds strong negative attitudes toward intensive farm production systems that currently dominate contemporary pork production (Ngapo et al 2004; Meuwissen et al 2007; Krystallis et al 2009). Not surprisingly, gestation stalls for sows have already been banned or are being phased out in much of the developed world, including the European Union, ten US States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa; simultaneously, the largest food companies in the world are adopting cage-free purchasing policies (von Keyserlingk & Hötzel 2015). In Brazil, one of the largest pig producers and exporters in the world (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO] 2014), almost without exception, gestating sows are reared in intensive commercial systems (approximately 2.1 million; Brazilian Association of Animal Protein [ABPA] 2015) and housed in individual stalls. Although there are no specific legislative initiatives to restrict such systems within Brazil (Cassuto & Eckhardt 2016), there is some evidence that Brazilian food companies are following international trends. For example, starting in 2014, the three largest pork producers BRF, JBS and Aurora announced their decision to transition to group housing for gestating sows in coming years. Interestingly, these announcements have been publicised in farm animal industry meetings and associated websites (Suinocultura Industrial 2015; BRF 2016) and on the websites of animal rights non-governmental organisations (HSI Brasil 2015), but with limited public outreach. The changes spearheaded by these producers appear to suggest interest within the Brazilian pork industry in following international standards and marketing strategies, possibly to secure potential import markets (von Keyserlingk & Hötzel 2015). Significant changes have taken place in Brazil since the World Animal Health