TAIL BITING

Vice behavior in swine production facilities is a welfare concern and an economic problem for producers. Tail biting is one of the top vice behavioral problems in grow-finish pigs leading to producer losses due to reductions in gain, secondary infections, death, or carcass condemnations. Tail biting can sporadically affect a single pig, an entire pen of pigs, or can be a pervasive problem facing entire flows of pigs. Numerous factors such as environment, animal husbandry, and nutrition can play a role in triggering this negative behavior.

Anyone who has walked through a pen of pigs has observed individual pigs or even certain genetic lines exhibiting more aggressive behaviors than others. Studies have shown that pigs are naturally attracted to the taste and sight of blood. However, natural behavior is only a piece of the puzzle and as previously stated, numerous other factors can increase the prevalence of tail biting such as:

- Tail docking (too long and inconsistent)
- Barn Management
- Nutrition (out of feed events, salt deficiency, etc.)
- Increased stocking density and overcrowding
- Temperature extremes
- Poor ventilation (poor air quality, drafts, humidity)
- Light (too dim/too bright, less than 6 hours of darkness per day)
- Health challenges

Tail docking

Properly docking tails is one of the best methods to reduce the incidence of tail biting. Docked tails should be uniform in length as it has been reported that herds with variable tail lengths have a greater incidence of tail biting.

Nutrition

Inadequate access to quality feed and water can both act as a trigger for tail biting. Some common feed quality issues associated with tail biting can include mycotoxins, low salt levels, or improperly balanced diets.

Stocking Density

As stocking density increases, so does competition at the feeder and waterer, which can result in increased ear and tail biting. In addition to stocking density, mixing pigs or pens with greater size variation may also have an increased risk of tail biting.

Environment

Several environmental factors within a barn can influence the incidence of tail biting such as: excessive heat or cold, improper ventilation, lighting, dust, or noxious gases. In current production systems, heat stress during the warm summer months is of greater concern than cold stress during the winter months. When pigs reach their upper critical temperature they begin to experience heat stress, which can trigger negative behaviors such as tail biting. It has been observed, in some cases, that misting pigs during hot weather has reduced tail biting. Greater daily temperature variations can result in increased tail biting compared to a consistent temperature outside of the pig's thermoneutral zone.

Drafts and increased humidity caused by improper ventilation can increase pig stress and tail-biting. Barn lighting, too brightly or dimly lit or not enough hours of darkness, may also impact the occurrence of tail biting. It is recommended that fluorescent lights emit 0.2 watts/ft^2, whereas incandescent lights should emit around 0.8 watts/ft^2, with at least 6 hours of darkness. Maintaining an optimal living environment through proper ventilation, lighting and temperature control will have a positive impact on pig welfare and the incidence of tail biting.

What can I do? A Solutions Check List

1. Properly Dock Tails

- Consistent mature length of 2-3 inches

2. Nutrition

- Formulate to proper digestible lysine levels in weight appropriate phases
- Budget the correct pounds per pig of each diet
- Manage mycotoxin ingestion by formulating diets with ingredients containing low levels of mycotoxins and implementing toxin mitigation products. Use of 5-8 lbs magnesium oxide per ton
- Add an additional 2-4 lbs of salt
- Add an additional 2-3 lbs of potassium chloride
- Assure adequate access to good quality water

3. Stocking Density

- Do not exceed pig density of less than 7.5 square ft. per pig
- Evenly remove pigs from every pen during the initial marketing period

4. Barn and Environmental Management

- Eliminate out of feed events
- Adjust feeder settings more open during late finishing when feeder competition is the highest
- Consider increasing minimum ventilation in late finishing
- Consider decreasing the set point in late finishing

5. Implement New Technology

- The AllBite vice mitigation block is a proven technology designed to combat tail biting. AllBite is a poured block containing biologically active ingredients that decrease aggression in pigs while providing a social stimulus. AllBite is a convenient and immediate solution for a producer to combat vice behavior