



VETERINARY IRELAND

POLICY DOCUMENT

ON

INTENSIVE PIG PRODUCTION

2025

RATIFIED BY
VETERINARY IRELAND NATIONAL COUNCIL
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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	Page 3
Introduction	Page 4
Background	Page 7
Principal welfare issues for Irish pig production	Page 8
Veterinary Ireland Policy to address challenges	Page 9
Reference List	Page 11



Executive Summary

Veterinary Ireland issued its last position statement on the welfare of pigs kept in intensive systems in 2017 calling for, inter alia, an end to the overcrowded conditions on many pig farms, the full enforcement of existing animal welfare legislation, increased animal welfare risk assessments and inspections, feedback of slaughterhouse health and welfare information to producers and their private veterinary practitioners (PVPs) and targeted government supports to assist farmers in improving pig welfare on Irish farms.

There have been some improvements over the last number of years with some investment in housing and facilities, assisted by increased welfare risk assessments and welfare inspections and advice, and the introduction of electronic recording and feedback of some slaughterhouse health and welfare data. Nevertheless, considerable challenges remain for pig welfare under intensive pig production systems in Ireland, including occurrence of disease and injury, behavioural problems such as tail biting and problems relating to poor management and nutrition.

In summary, Veterinary Ireland makes the following recommendations to address these challenges and urges all veterinarians, and specialist pig practitioners in particular, to actively promote the changes required.

1. Space allowances per pig must be increased. Existing EU regulations covering housing standards are not adhered to on many units, as documented by Animal Welfare Assessments conducted by specialist pig practitioners under the Animal Health Ireland (AHI) Targeted Advisory Service on Animal Health (TASAH) scheme. However, these space allowances are known to be inadequate for optimal welfare based on published scientific studies and should be increased to reduce tail biting behaviour and increase growth rate (EFSA, 2022).

The EU Council Directive 2008/120/EC on rearing of pigs with intact tails requires full implementation.

2. Extensive education and improved training of pig farmers and their staff is needed to ensure optimal management of intensively farmed pigs, including provision of adequate nutrition and prevention of hunger, excellent disease control and prevention of behavioural problems such as tail biting.

3. Grant aid is required to provide the necessary financial support for installation of the infrastructure necessary to improve animal welfare and the sustainability of pig farming. The level of aid available under the Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme (TAMS) needs to be increased if substantial improvements in welfare are to be achieved.



Introduction

The current Veterinary Ireland policy on intensive pig production dates from 2017. At that time, the organisation called for several measures to be implemented. A summary of progress on these measures since that time follows:

1. Veterinary Ireland calls for full enforcement of existing animal welfare legislation on the provision of space requirements for all ages of pigs to ensure an end to the current overcrowded conditions on many pig farms.

Unfortunately, although there have been increased inspections by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) in recent years, overcrowding remains an issue on many farms.

2. Veterinary Ireland calls for full enforcement of the legal requirement to provide sufficient manipulable material for all pigs and so minimise the occurrence of tail biting and the necessity for tail docking.

There is evidence of increased efforts by farmers to provide more enrichment to their pigs based on data from welfare assessments by specialist pig practitioners under the AHI TASAH scheme. Although optimal enrichment in the form of manipulable material is not provided on most farms due to incompatibility with slurry handling systems, many farmers now provide suboptimal enrichment in the form of hessian cloth, natural ropes or soft wood planks. However, the quantity of enrichment provided per pen is not yet optimal.

3. Veterinary Ireland calls for more animal welfare inspections of pigs by veterinarians as a means of dealing with animal welfare problems in the Irish pig industry. Veterinary Ireland calls for the implementation of the EU Commission Recommendation 2016/336 requiring risk assessment of tail-biting on pig farms based on animal and environmental indicators and calls on the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) to actively include the veterinary profession in the performance of these assessments and the development of measures on Irish pig farms to comply with legal welfare requirements. It is suggested that regular risk assessment for poor animal welfare should be conducted with identification of the three highest risks to animal welfare on the unit. This should be followed by drawing up of recommendations to improve the three issues identified.

Animal welfare assessments are now conducted under the AHI TASAH programme for animal welfare and most commercial units have now been assessed at least once (401 units assessed once and 354 units assessed more than once, data as of the beginning of April 2025). However, the current Pig Health Check Tail Biting Risk Factor Assessment is not performing well (D'Alessio et al. 2024) and a revised risk factor assessment, based on the SchwiP protocol developed in Germany, is under preparation with Teagasc and is due for roll out in the near future.

4. Veterinary Ireland calls on the government to lobby for full implementation of Council Directive 2008/120/EC throughout all EU member states and to promote the uptake of measures identified in the EU Overview report on Study Visits on Rearing Pigs with Intact Tails.

There has been no substantial progress on rearing pigs with intact tails either in Ireland or in many other major EU pig-producing countries since 2017. A few farmers have tried to rear small numbers of pigs with intact tails with varying success rates.



5. Veterinary Ireland calls for full enforcement of the legislative requirement for the feedback of slaughterhouse health and welfare information to producers and their private veterinary practitioners (PVPs). Veterinary Ireland calls for slaughterhouse operators and the DAFM to assist with the electronic recording of slaughterhouse health data in order to positively assist with health and welfare planning at farm level. Recording and feedback of pathological data (pleurisy / peritonitis / abscessation / tail biting lesions, etc) will greatly assist with health and welfare planning at farm level. Immediate and accurate feedback is a useful management tool for the producer and PVP.

Considerable progress has been made on this issue through the AHI Pig Health Check Programme. There is now a dashboard with ante-mortem findings available to pig veterinarians and their clients. Work on a dashboard for post-mortem findings is ongoing, with work completed in one major export abattoir and rollout in all large abattoirs expected by end 2025.

6. Veterinary Ireland calls on veterinary practitioners and specialist pig practitioners in particular, to review their adherence to their ethical obligations to promote and safeguard the health and welfare of the animals under their care. Veterinary Ireland urges practitioners to actively engage with their clients to ensure that farmers are fully aware of all their obligations in respect of animal welfare and to assist in education of farmers in correct procedures as required. This includes the obligation to educate their clients on the care of sick and injured pigs and insist on prompt euthanasia where required to prevent animal suffering. Identification of pigs for euthanasia should be performed daily in most instances and animal health reviews with the veterinarian must be undertaken regularly. Veterinary Ireland calls on the DAFM to ensure the formal training and certification of all persons carrying out euthanasia of pigs on farms.

Good communication between veterinarians and their clients is central to progress on this issue as there are complex social and behavioural factors at play. All specialist pig practitioners have received training in motivational interviewing techniques through AHI and have expressed their satisfaction with the training. The Technical Working Group of the Pig Health Check programme has recently discussed the problem of sick and lingering pigs and is considering next steps to help address the issue.

7. Veterinary Ireland calls on the DAFM and other pig industry stakeholders to support implementation of the recommendations of the Report on the Pig Industry Stakeholder Group published in January 2016. Veterinary Ireland calls on the DAFM to provide targeted supports to assist farmers in making the necessary changes required to ensure good animal welfare, such as improvement of farm buildings and facilities.

A pig and poultry investment scheme under the Targeted Agriculture Modernisation Schemes (TAMS) provides funding for upgrades in the pig sector. Approval of funding is tied to improvements in animal welfare and sustainability. This has led to improvements on some farms although many farmers maintain that the level of support provided is not sufficient to make the substantial changes required to, for example, transition to free farrowing systems.

8. Veterinary Ireland supports the Teagasc Pig Advisory group in their work to promote animal health and welfare and seeks to strengthen collaborative work between the veterinary profession and Teagasc advisors and researchers. Veterinary Ireland supports Teagasc in the running of pig farmer discussion groups as a forum to improve farmer understanding of the close relationship between animal and public health and animal welfare and to drive the changes necessary for improvement of the welfare of Irish pigs.

The AHI Pig Health Check Programme was set up in late 2019 and is actively working on many of the objectives outlined under this item.



9. Veterinary Ireland calls on the DAFM to extend the Knowledge Transfer scheme to the pig farming sector.

The AHI Pig Health Check Programme and Teagasc Pig Advisory group are addressing many of the objectives of the knowledge transfer scheme and continue their work addressing key issues for the Irish pig industry. The AHI Pig Health Check programme is co-funded by DAFM and pig producers and operates in collaboration with farmers, Teagasc, specialist pig veterinary practitioners and other stakeholders including pig processors.

10. Veterinary Ireland calls on the pig sector to consider introducing a scheme where high welfare product is identified, and a bonus is paid to the producer. An advertising and educational campaign for consumers would be required to justify the higher cost of such product.

No progress on such a scheme has been made to-date as there are considerable differences between the views of affected stakeholders. Recent research by Teagasc in this area showed that some consumers are willing to pay more but retailers have not implemented such schemes (although Marks and Spencers have started selling a high welfare pork product in Ireland recently and there is evidence in other countries that large supermarket chains are forcing changes in farm production methods).

Thus, although there has been progress under some headings since 2017, the major issues of overcrowding, lameness and lack of compliance with the EU Directive on intact tails continue to pose serious challenges to pig welfare on many Irish farms. In this updated policy, Veterinary Ireland focuses on these continuing issues and on new challenges that have become apparent in modern Irish intensive pig production.



Background

Pig production is an important industry worldwide with the demand for pork having increased 4-fold in the last 50 years (Lassaletta et al. 2019). The pig industry in Ireland is the third most important agricultural sector after dairy and beef production, comprising approximately 7% of gross agricultural output. Commercial pig farming is a small, intensive industry in Ireland with approximately 290 farms producing the majority of the 3.3m pigs slaughtered annually. Almost all of Ireland's 1.4m pigs (CSO, December 2023) are reared indoors in confined systems with fully slatted floors.

Livestock production, including pig production, comes with considerable challenges in terms of sustainability, with costs in terms of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, waste disposal, biodiversity loss, public health concerns related to antimicrobial use (AMU) and resistance (the pig sector is the biggest user of antimicrobials compared to other livestock sectors) and animal welfare. Thus, sustainability and circular farming practices must be inextricably linked with any efforts to improve animal welfare.

(Bartlett et al. 2024) examined systems of pig farming in the UK in terms of their impact on land use, GHG emissions, AMU and animal welfare. They examined intensive indoor systems, extensive free range, organic and woodland farms. They found that none of the systems performed well consistently across all four measures although in general, systems that performed well in terms of animal welfare and AMU performed poorly in terms of land use and GHG emissions and vice versa (Bartlett et al. 2024). However, these authors reported that within each system of production there were farms that did well based on three of the four measures of impact and a few that did well on all four measures. This suggests that improving pig farming in terms of measures of societal concern should not necessarily focus on simply changing the type of farming but on improving outcomes within individual farms. The authors also concluded that current labelling methods for consumers did not allow informed choices when considering a broad range rather than a single consumer concern.

Pigs are intelligent, inquisitive animals and unfortunately, indoor systems as used in Ireland are usually associated with significant welfare issues. Problems due the lack of bedding and inadequate enrichment materials include lameness, routine tail docking and tail biting (Maes et al., 2019). All animals, whatever their purpose, are entitled, at a minimum, to 'a life worth living, i.e. lives where they can and do avail themselves of opportunities to have positive experiences (Mellor, 2016).' Furthermore, it is hoped that in the future, all farmed animals, including pigs, have not just a life worth living but a lifetime experience where the balance of salient positive and negative experiences is strongly positive (Mellor 2016). In June 2025, stakeholders in the Netherlands, including government authorities, farmers, retailers, social interest groups and others, signed a "Covenant on animal welfare friendly production" where the industry committed to animal welfare-centred production by 2040. (https://www.pig333.com/latest_swine_news/the-netherlands-takes-steps-towards-greater-animal-welfare-by-2040_21572/). The aim is to have the first provisions giving legal basis to the covenant introduced in 2027. The costs are high but if this initiative comes to full fruition, it will be a major positive change for animal welfare in the Netherlands and serve as a model for other countries to follow. Real change requires political will and buy-in of all stakeholders as exemplified by this Dutch initiative.



On the 10th June 2021 the plenary session of the European Parliament, voted by an overwhelming majority in favour of a resolution requesting the EU Commission to introduce legislative proposals to ban the use of cages in animal farming by 2027. For pig production, this resolution demands the introduction of free farrowing systems. Furthermore, in 2022, EFSA published a scientific opinion on the welfare of pigs (Nielsen et al., 2022) which presents in detail the many welfare issues documented in current intensive pig production in the EU, including Ireland, their associated risk factors and possible mitigation measures.

Principal welfare issues for Irish pig production

1. Prolonged hunger in sows associated with lack of adequate dietary fibre. Many sows in Ireland are fed using liquid feeding systems. Feeding calculations in these systems frequently underestimate intake requirements, especially during lactation, resulting in hunger and loss of body condition, “thin sow syndrome”. Although many farmers now recognise the problems associated with excessive weight loss during lactation and take measures to address this, it remains a problem on some farms. Advances in genetic research over the last two decades has increased the average litter size born to sows by over 30% (from 10.85 in 2000 to 14.26 piglets born alive in 2020, (Boyle et al. 2022). Suckling piglets may also suffer prolonged hunger and thirst due to excessively large litter sizes and poor farrowing house management. Increased litter sizes have meant that there are insufficient teats for all piglets in many instances. Cross fostering and use of nurse sows are used to address this problem but these practices need careful management to ensure good piglet welfare.
2. Restricted ability to display normal behaviours that leads to frustration and resultant, abnormal repetitive behaviours such as bar-biting. These are known as stereotypies and are indicative of severe mental distress.
3. Overcrowding: many units in Ireland now produce 34 pigs/sow/year compared to an average of 23 pigs/sow/year two decades ago. This has contributed to the problem of overcrowding, as in many cases buildings have not been upgraded to account for increased production. Overcrowding can lead to increased levels of disease, aggression, reduced pig comfort, poor hygiene with pigs lying in their own waste, increased levels of vices such as tail, ear and flank biting and a possible association with increased incidence of umbilical hernias. Increased levels of overstocking at pen level were noted in pig farms during welfare assessments by PVPs in 2024 compared to previous years.
4. Pressure injuries associated with hard lying surfaces and trauma, including decubital ulcers in sows and bursitis and calluses in pigs of any age.
5. Painful husbandry procedures such as tail docking, undertaken to limit tail biting. Ireland, along with many other EU countries, is not compliant with the EU Council Directive 2008/120/EC on this, and most pigs are still tail docked routinely. Teeth reduction, if performed incorrectly, can also lead to short or long-term pain.



6. Animal health is inextricably linked with animal welfare as disease will inevitably lead to compromised welfare. Thus, high levels of gastrointestinal and respiratory disease (Rodrigues da Costa et al. 2020) and lameness (Boyle 2013) in some Irish pig herds leads to poor welfare in affected animals. It is noteworthy that anecdotal evidence of specialist pig veterinarians suggests that herds with high health status have fewer welfare problems, including reduced levels of vices.

7. Poor management at weaning leads to stress, aggression and post-weaning diarrhoea with resultant high levels of antimicrobial use and other consequences such as increased tail biting. The implementation of the ban on use of therapeutic levels of zinc oxide (Regulation [EU] 2019/6 on veterinary medicines) has resulted in animal health challenges in some farms with associated increases in AMU during 2024 (AHI and DAFM data; (Bolton et al. 2025). Similar trends have been noted in some other EU countries.

Veterinary Ireland Policy to address challenges

1. Pigs should be kept in groups at lower stocking densities, ideally lower than the legal maximum, with separate areas for urination & defecation and where at least part of the floors are solid, with straw or other manipulable material for bedding and rooting. Although there is no access to the outdoors, there is greater opportunity for natural behaviour, free movement within the pen or shed, less crowding, conflict, boredom and tail-biting. Deep bedded systems allow foraging and comfort but adopting such systems would involve a radical change from current practice in Ireland, requiring complete re-purposing of all buildings and sourcing of adequate bedding materials. Provision of adequate manipulable material for enrichment, improvement of current housing systems and other measures to prevent tail-biting are more realistic short-term objectives for commercial pig production in Ireland. Most of these improvements are already legislated for; Veterinary Ireland calls for full enforcement of legislation to bring about these changes.

2. Good management and husbandry can make significant improvements to the welfare of intensively reared pigs:

- a. Improving genetics to reduce prolificacy (more longevity for the sows, lower piglet mortality).
- b. Housing conditions, including ventilation must be optimised to prevent high levels of ammonia and detrimental effects on respiratory health.
- c. Provision of correctly formulated diets and adequate feeding space for each production stage is essential to ensure freedom from hunger and aggression.

3. Adherence to good mixing practices including ensuring good pen design, good feeding and general management. There has been considerable research in this area and practices such as co-mingling litters before weaning, mixing sows on solid flooring initially and other changes which are not costly to implement can be made to reduce aggression and fear.

4. Euthanasia of sick and lingering pigs (FAWAC 2017). Identification of pigs for euthanasia should be performed daily on pig farms in most instances. Euthanasia of these pigs must be performed by a person competent to do so (as required under Regulation (EC) 1099/2009).



- 5.** Veterinary Ireland calls on the DAFM to ensure that pig farmers are provided with the knowledge and training to implement the above improvements. This should include continued support by both DAFM and the pig industry for the Pig Health Check Programme.
- 6.** Veterinary Ireland calls on veterinary practitioners and specialist pig practitioners in particular, to actively engage in promoting changes to improve welfare in the Irish pig industry. Practitioners have a central role in communication to their clients of the necessity for change and provision of advice on how to implement required changes, in addition to their traditional role in maintaining animal health.
- 7.** Transition to systems where pigs' tails remain intact must occur and will involve a constant cycle of assessment of on-farm risk factors and adoption of farm-specific measures that may include dietary changes, provision of adequate enrichment materials, vaccination against diseases, increasing space and genetic selection.
- 8.** Sows may still give birth in farrowing crates to protect the piglets for the first vulnerable period of their lives. However it should be noted that good research data to guide the use of free farrowing are now available and countries such as Finland, Switzerland, Sweden, and Norway have largely adopted free farrowing systems, albeit such systems require substantial subsidies for the farmer or a closed market and payment of higher prices by consumers.
- 9.** Promotion of further research into alternative welfare-friendly systems, both improved indoor systems and other systems that may include partial access to outdoors or completely outdoor systems. Impacts on GHG emissions and other societal concerns should also be investigated in parallel.
- 10.** Use of behavioural science to promote adoption of necessary changes by the Irish pig industry. Behavioural science methods are already employed through the AHI Pig Health Check programme and the use of such methods is essential to ensure real change takes place to improve pig welfare. More initiatives to educate consumers to accept higher prices for high welfare and more sustainable pork products are also necessary.
- 11.** Provision of realistic TAMS and other support mechanisms to facilitate the changes in infrastructure that will be necessary to ensure improved pig welfare and sustainability in Ireland.



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