

These are links to the Chicago Tribune's articles about abuse in Illinois hog confinements:

[Whipped, kicked, beaten: Illinois workers describe abuse of hogs](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/watchdog/pork/ct-pig-farms-abuse-met-20160802-story.html)

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/watchdog/pork/ct-pig-farms-abuse-met-20160802-story.html>

[Pork industry, activists debate cruelty recorded in undercover videos](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/watchdog/pork/ct-pig-farms-undercover-videos-met-20160802-story.html)

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/watchdog/pork/ct-pig-farms-undercover-videos-met-20160802-story.html>

[Pork producers defend gestation crates, but consumers demand change](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/watchdog/pork/ct-pig-farms-gestation-crates-met-20160802-story.html)

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/watchdog/pork/ct-pig-farms-gestation-crates-met-20160802-story.html>

[New animal abuse allegations surface at Illinois hog confinement](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/watchdog/pork/ct-pig-farms-abuse-update-met-20161227-story.html)

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/watchdog/pork/ct-pig-farms-abuse-update-met-20161227-story.html>

And here is a brief explanation of that reporting:

The Illinois pork industry has been accorded remarkable government secrecy. In response to Tribune open records requests, state officials said they didn't know how many hog confinements existed in Illinois and denied a request for the locations of facilities known to the state, citing the privacy of the owners. The football-field-long sheds are off limits to the public for bio-security reasons.

The industry's labor force includes locals and immigrants with few other employment options who told reporters they feared retribution if they talked. However, reporters were able to put 19 workers on record to describe in their own words the systemic mistreatment of pigs they witnessed and in one case inflicted.

The worker accounts were the only way to expose the violence -- there were few government reports in Illinois, which has under-resourced livestock protection programs as well as felony eavesdropping laws that have discouraged undercover activists.

Many of these workers had been injured, fired or involved in litigation with their employers. To guard against bias, the reporters used open-ended interviews, conducted background checks and sought corroboration from fellow employees.

Giving pork producers information and time to respond to the worker accounts, the Tribune for the first time published internal industry data on animal abuse allegations in the facilities, with detailed commentary from industry leaders.

For the team's report on the crates that hold birthing sows for much of their lives, the team spent days documenting one 6,000-sow gestation barn, examined scientific papers and talked to animal researchers to understand how the crates evolved and why many call them more humane than the alternatives.

The team also gathered and analyzed all known undercover animal welfare videos from U.S. hog confinements since 1998, check criminal charges and gather industry responses for a study of the videos produced by advocates.

Whipped, kicked, beaten: Illinois workers describe abuse of hogs



Confining breeding sows in tight crates is among the long-standing farm practices that are exempted from animal cruelty laws in Illinois. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

By **David Jackson and Gary Marx**

Chicago Tribune

AUGUST 4, 2016, 8:56 PM

Weeks after taking a job as a breeding technician at Eagle Point Farms, an anguished Sharee Santorineos sat down and wrote a three-page whistleblower complaint.

"I seen pigs that are pregnant beat with steel bars," said her letter to the Illinois Bureau of Animal Health and Welfare. "I seen them kicked all over their body."

Santorineos knows about raising animals. At a friend's rural Illinois farmhouse, she grows pigs and poultry that they eventually will have slaughtered.

Still, what she saw at the western Illinois confinement appalled her, and she hoped her December 2015 letter would prompt a thorough state investigation.

Instead, like other worker allegations about animal abuse in Illinois' 900-plus hog confinement facilities, Santorineos' account went nowhere.

After Eagle Point executives gave a state bureau inspector a guided tour of the 6,000-pig operation, he wrote a single-page report.

"I did not observe anyone mistreating the animals," it said. "No violations found. Docket is closed."

The state has regularly discounted or dismissed such worker complaints, a Tribune investigation has found. In the Illinois hog confinements that send 12 million pigs to market annually, the bureau did not find a single animal welfare infraction or violation during the past five years, the Tribune found in reviewing thousands of pages of bureau records.

A lack of inspectors — the bureau has just six — contributes to the scant enforcement, while weak Illinois and federal livestock protection laws do little to safeguard animals.

Questions about how the pigs, cows and poultry we eat are treated — what the animals are fed, how they are medicated and how they live and die — are putting new pressures on a U.S. livestock industry that until recently has focused almost exclusively on productivity and profit.

Animal rights activists have lifted the welfare of livestock into the public consciousness by taking jobs in hog confinements and secretly recording pigs being pummeled, dragged with hooks and pinned for life in crates. But Illinois law makes it a potential felony to record a conversation without the consent of all parties, and no undercover stings have emerged from the state.

Using worker compensation claims, court records and animal abuse reports filed with the state Agriculture Department, Tribune reporters for the first time pieced together a disturbing portrait of abusive treatment in pig confinements here amid lax scrutiny from the state.

In on-the-record interviews, Santorineos and more than a dozen other Illinois swine-confinement workers told the Tribune they witnessed fellow employees whip pigs with metal rods and gouge them with pliers and ballpoint pens to hurry the animals from one stall to the next or onto the trucks that took them to slaughter.

They described employees abusing pigs for amusement and encouraging colleagues to take out their frustrations on the animals.

Worker accounts of cruelty and torture arose in hog confinements across the state run by market-leading firms.

Some workers said their supervisors meted out punishment to speed up lame or unwilling pigs. "He'd

kick them," said Kelley Shannon, a former employee of a Professional Swine Management confinement in western Illinois. "I'm talking, full-bore kick. Bloody its nose and punch a pig so hard it damn near popped its eye out."

Pork industry representatives and Professional Swine executives told the Tribune they do not tolerate mistreatment and increasingly are taking proactive steps, including internal hotlines for workers to report problems.

Facility operators also cautioned that former workers can be biased. They are likely to embellish, industry representatives said, because they are angry at their bosses, upset about their experiences or simply trying to impress journalists.

When the state receives an allegation of abuse, it is the job of an obscure and understaffed bureau in the Illinois Department of Agriculture to investigate.

The six inspectors in the Bureau of Animal Health and Welfare, down from 12 in 2005, must handle complaints about not just the mistreatment of livestock but also dead goldfish in dirty pet store tanks, dogs in kennel cages and filth in petting zoos.

The number of animal welfare violations the bureau issued across all of these settings fell from 200 in 2005 to 29 last year, while referrals for prosecution dropped during that period from 22 per year to just one, state records show.

When the bureau fielded a 2013 whistleblower allegation that employees were hitting pigs with metal bars at the Win Production LLC hog confinement in Scott County, a state inspector's investigation consisted largely of a few phone calls. In his report, he wrote that he spoke with a facility manager whose name was listed only as "Betty" and an owner "whose name eludes me at this time."

In that phone call, facility executives denied the allegation. The veterinarian at the facility, Alan Wildt, sent the inspector a short email stating he had visited the farm monthly for years and had "never witnessed any production practices that could be considered abusive."

On the basis of that email and the phone calls, the inspector reported: "There is no proof the (abuse) claim can be verified so the docket is closed."

Illinois state veterinarian Mark Ernst, who oversees the animal welfare bureau, said his inspectors do not have police powers and typically do not question fellow workers who might corroborate a whistleblower's account.

"Our investigations are handled a little differently than what you would think of as a criminal investigation," Ernst said. "The primary goal is to try and get compliance and to educate those people so

they don't make the same mistake."

A lot of pressure



Smart, strong-willed and muscular, pigs can be frustrating to handle even when raised on pastures or small family farms. Still, Illinois' massive, modern-day confinements create new pressures that contribute to animal abuse.

Pig handlers deal with hundreds or thousands of animals at a time. Animals bred for their lean meat can be aggressive and resistant to handling, and some facilities use feed additives that promote hog growth but also can stimulate hyperactivity and belligerent behavior. For immigrant workers, a language barrier can impede communication about acceptable handling practices.

"A lot of things have come together that put workers and animals under a lot of pressure," said Emily Patterson-Kane, a top animal welfare scientist with the American Veterinary Medical Association and a former "pigger" in Scotland.

Some workers told the Tribune their colleagues often abused pigs when hustling the animals from pen to pen or onto slaughter trucks.

Hog confinement workers are trained to walk behind groups of animals, usually shaking "rattle paddles" to make a sharp noise that repels pigs. But the leader can't be guided that way if workers are trying to move more than a handful of pigs, meat industry consultant Temple Grandin told the Tribune.

"The No. 1 mistake that people make is trying to move too many market pigs at a time," said Grandin, a professor at Colorado State University.

In those situations, workers said, it becomes tempting to abuse the pigs to make them move. Terry Clement, a former employee at a downstate Christensen Farms facility, said young female pigs, called gilts, would often freeze as they were moved into the area where they were to be isolated in metal cages known as gestation crates.

"I've seen a lot of guys beat on the gilts," Clement said. "I've seen their backs. Big long scratches that bleed."

He added: "I seen pregnant sows being beat on with the rattle paddles. I've seen them scratched on the back with pens. We had fiberglass sort boards — you'd catch them hitting the hogs with those."

When a supervisor walked the floor, "you had to go by the book," Clement said. "But when he wasn't there, everybody just wanted to hurry up and go home."

Christensen Farms CEO Glenn Stolt did not challenge the Tribune accounts of abuse from Clement or other former company workers, calling them "troubling," but said his firm has significantly strengthened its protections for the animals by bolstering training, implementing an anonymous employee hotline and conducting unannounced audits. In a costly pilot program, the company in May installed video monitors inside one facility.

With 113 workers in its Illinois hog confinements, Christensen Farms last year had nine internal reports of animal abuse across the state, company officials said. The company deemed two instances to be "willful" and terminated both employees. One admitted kicking a sow, and the other let baby piglets go hungry rather than train a new employee how to feed them.

"My expectation is that it's zero, and that's the expectation we communicate all the time," Stolt said. "There is no place for any animal abuse."

Ernst, the state veterinarian, said he couldn't estimate how often pigs are abused in Illinois confinements.

"You've got to keep in mind, any good producer, this is their livelihood. It's how they feed their families and put their kids through school. And obviously if they don't have healthy and happy animals, it's going to be very difficult for them to make a living. The very good ones, I think they're right on top of it, and like anything else, you also have the other end of the spectrum."

Still, some executives told the Tribune they rarely enter their facilities, leaving to line workers the difficult job of handling the pigs day to day.

Facilities often pay little more than minimum wage and use the agricultural exemption from overtime laws. Confinement workers described bruising attacks from frantic pigs, as well as headaches and persistent respiratory ailments caused by animal dander and gases from the waste storage pits below.

"I wouldn't recommend anyone to do that job," said Jacob Allen, whose eight-month term at a southern Illinois facility run by The Maschhoffs LLC ended when a charging 250-pound pig shoved him into a gate, according to Allen's claim with the Illinois Workers' Compensation Commission and a Tribune interview.

But in his economically challenged part of the state, Allen said, "there's not much else, so you take what you can get."

“

The pigs got beat up so bad they don't move.

— Former pig farm worker Raymond Hamilton

Grandin, who has worked in the field for decades, recalled how commonplace abuse was in "the bad old days of the '80s and early '90s."

Back then, Grandin estimated, "20 percent of the people did a good job of handling pigs."

Today that percentage is much higher, she said. But when facilities are understaffed or employees have to perform repetitive tasks for hours — such as vaccinating, impregnating, castrating or moving hundreds of pigs — "workers get tired, they get frustrated and impatient. It's very difficult to care," she said.

"I've been around for a long time and there's some people that — they enjoy hurting animals and they should not be there."

'We hit 'em hard'

Even at facilities run by a company that champions animal welfare, the Tribune found allegations of mistreatment.

The Maschhoffs, the nation's third-largest pork producer, was one of the first large companies to create a top-level animal welfare division eight years ago, and workers said their barn bosses did not tolerate mistreatment.

"Maschhoffs wouldn't even let you use a clothespin (to prod a pig). They'd fire you on the spot," said Randall Hall, who worked until 2012 at one company complex.

But when supervisors weren't around, "workers beat the pigs with paddles, with hoses, boards and metal rods," said Raymond Hamilton, who worked until last year at a facility in downstate Carlyle.

"The pigs got beat up so bad they don't move," Hamilton said.

When a pig buckled under that kind of abuse, employees euthanized the animal with a shot between the eyes from a livestock bolt gun, workers said.

"I've seen one guy actually shoot one because he done stressed it out too bad. He's like, 'Oh we got to kill this,'" said former Maschhoffs worker Joshua Owens.

"Some of the employees, it was fun to them to be mean to an animal," Owens said. "When the bigwigs came, they straightened up."

Maschhoffs President Bradley Wolter said he was outraged to hear allegations of abuse from a Tribune

reporter.

"I am just appalled by it. It goes against everything I believe in and we believe in as a company," Wolter said. "We're in the practice of pig production and there is a nobility to it. These animals trust us to take care of them. We don't think there is anybody else on the planet that cares more about these animals than we do."

Wolter said employees make about 70 to 100 calls per year to the company's internal animal abuse hotline, and since 2015 Maschhoffs has terminated seven of its 1,300 workers nationwide after finding evidence of abuse, neglect or mistreatment of a pig. The firm recently alerted government authorities to an abuse allegation at one facility that is not in Illinois, Wolter said, although he provided no further details.

"Do I believe we have individuals that lose their temper and harm an animal? The data says it happens. We've terminated those people. It disgusts me," Wolter said.

One Illinois worker discharged by Maschhoffs, Michael Cavins, told the Tribune he frequently witnessed co-workers abuse pigs to get them to move — and soon took part in the violence.

"Yes, that happened. We hit 'em hard with the paddles to get 'em to move," Cavins said. "That was one of the reasons I was discharged."

Cavins told the Tribune he had worked with pigs for more than a decade and Maschhoffs had retrained him on how to move animals without harming them. Yet he joined other workers who aggressively moved the sows, until a supervisor spotted him.

"I wish I'd went by the book and not even done it," Cavins said. "I just hit 'em too hard. It's going on all the time; they're constantly being hit when the supervisors aren't around."

'It doesn't look pretty'

Deliberate torture of farm animals can be a crime in Illinois, but only veterinarians are mandated to report it — not facility workers, supervisors or operators. Many Illinois confinement veterinarians visit the facilities only once or twice a month, and none has reported abuse in the facilities since 2011, the Tribune found. No companies have reported incidents to the state bureau during that time.

Illinois also is among the 38 states where long-standing farm practices are exempted from animal cruelty laws. These include castrating piglets and clipping their tails, teeth and ears without pain relief, as well as confining breeding sows in tight gestation and farrowing crates.

"Normal husbandry practices means anything farmers have done in the past, even if they are extremely

cruel," said Joan Schaffner, a George Washington University Law School associate professor. "If you were to do the same thing to your dog or cat, it would clearly be criminal."

Another example of practices that livestock handlers accept but consumers find deeply disturbing is the way piglets are euthanized.

Breeding facilities like Eagle Point cull deformed and underweight piglets because high-speed slaughterhouses require uniformity in animal weight and size, so that their processing machines and line workers can quickly make repetitive motions that pull the carcasses apart.

Illinois confinement workers often are trained to euthanize the runts and sick animals by grabbing their back legs and smashing the animals' heads into the concrete floor or metal crates. If done correctly, veterinary experts say, this head blow destroys a piglet's brain and causes no pain.

State veterinarian Ernst said of the practice: "It doesn't look pretty, but it is instantaneous and humane."

Ernst added that the head smashing can be emotionally difficult for workers who took jobs in livestock confinements because they wanted to care for animals. "That is a challenge, getting people trained up to do these duties."

It was certainly a problem for Santorineos, who refused to kill pigs and recoiled at the actions of her co-workers.

Some workers who failed at killing a piglet on the first try would frequently toss it aside and leave it to die, she and other Illinois confinement employees told the Tribune. The workers also described stressed colleagues whipping piglets against the floor out of anger and frustration.

Santorineos told the Tribune that the youngest Eagle Point workers would bet on how many hits it would take to put out a piglet.

The American Veterinary Medical Association says "blunt force trauma" can be a merciful way to kill piglets less than 3 weeks old. But the association's most recent guidelines recommend that producers consider alternatives ranging from a bolt gun to small carbon dioxide chambers, electrocution and barbiturate overdose supervised by a veterinarian.

Some companies are already making changes. Starting in September, Maschhoffs will exclusively use carbon dioxide chambers to euthanize piglets, company officials said.

And U.S. pork retailer Tyson now discourages the head-smashing technique. The company in 2014 issued a letter telling pig suppliers the practice "had been historically acceptable" but did not meet the

expectations of consumers.

Bill Hollis, a partner with Professional Swine Management, the Carthage, Ill.-based company that manages Eagle Point and 26 other confinements in Illinois, Iowa and Missouri, said he was unaware of the Tyson advisory.

Santorineos said she was threatened with termination for refusing to euthanize piglets at Eagle Point and then fired for wearing street clothes in a restricted area. Days later, she filed her abuse allegations with the state.

While she was employed she sent notes to her confinement supervisor detailing injuries to pigs, but nothing came of it, she said. "The farm boss ... told me not to worry about it," Santorineos wrote in her complaint to the state.

"The sows get beat when they are trying to move them from the big barn to the farrowing room," she told the Tribune. "Their legs give out. They walk real slow. (Workers) take the rods that hold the cages closed and beat 'em and kick 'em."

Regarding Santorineos' allegations, Hollis said he concluded that "there was no animal abuse or mistreatment." Still, the firm held a retraining session for Eagle Point employees.

Professional Swine is managed by veterinarians but does not contact the state bureau when abuse allegations surface, company officials said. Instead it conducts internal investigations. The firm says it has dismissed four employees so far this year for mistreatment and animal welfare infractions at its facilities.

At Tyson's behest, Eagle Point went through a scheduled, four-hour-long animal welfare audit in July 2015. The third-party inspection reported "no willful acts of abuse observed" on that morning.

A former co-worker of Santorineos', Beverly Hopping, told the Tribune that she also complained fruitlessly to her supervisor about animal abuse. "They did nothing about it. I went to them many times," Hopping said.

"There was a guy who was really mean to the hogs," she said. "He would leave deep scrapes on them. Some of them would be bleeding."

When piglets had a rupture following a botched castration, "they just take them by the back legs and smash them on the ground," Hopping said. "Sometimes they wouldn't die immediately. They kept kicking and twitching. They told us that is part of our jobs. Some people there would do it just for spite."

Eagle Point fired Hopping in January.

Santorineos said some workers also tormented the animals by sticking vaccination needles in an eye into their spines, making them shudder convulsively. "They would laugh about how long they would shake."

Patterson-Kane said she believes few confinement workers take pleasure in inflicting pain.

"A really tiny proportion might be sadists, but workers don't get up in the morning and say, 'I'd like to beat me some pigs,'" Patterson-Kane said. "Somehow they've gotten frustrated. They are trying to meet a performance standard and get something done, and they don't see another way to do it. That's a failure of the system."

djackson@chicagotribune.com

Twitter @Poolcar4

gmarx@chicagotribune.com

Twitter @garyjmarx

Copyright © 2017, Chicago Tribune
Reprinted with permission.

This article is related to: [Crime](#)

Pork industry, activists debate cruelty recorded in undercover videos

By **David Jackson and Madison Hopkins**

Chicago Tribune

AUGUST 3, 2016, 4:16 AM

Undercover videos by animal welfare activists have documented the cruelty that can occur inside America's large hog confinements — facilities that are off-limits to the public and largely unregulated by government agencies.

The clips have influenced consumers and pressured some of the nation's most powerful food companies to terminate employees, end supply contracts and introduce sweeping changes such as phasing out the narrow metal "gestation crates" that hold birthing pigs for much of their lives.

The Tribune gathered all known undercover videos of U.S. hog confinements since 1998 — 20 in total — and checked them against records showing the outcome of any criminal charges and industry responses. When available, the newspaper included commentary from industry animal-handling experts on which practices were acceptable and which were not.

Criminal animal cruelty charges were filed against at least 23 employees following the release of six videos, the newspaper found. Eighteen of the workers were convicted and punished with short jail stints, small fines or probation terms that prohibited working with animals for a period of time. In nine additional cases, workers were fired or large pork producers and retailers cut ties with the hog confinement.

Portions of the undercover film reveal behavior that some industry officials call sadistic. One clip shows a worker punting piglets into the air like footballs and others capture employees encouraging their colleagues to take out their frustrations on the animals.

Some workers also engage in what industry experts call unnecessary rough handling as they drag animals by the snout and beat injured hogs.

Other videos capture animal handling practices that may upset consumers but are supported by the nation's top veterinarian association and by academic researchers who study animal welfare. Workers castrate piglets without pain relief, for example, and euthanize runts by smashing their heads on the ground. They also grind up the internal organs of piglets that die from viruses and feed the mixture to

mother pigs to immunize herds against disease.

Animal welfare activists told the Tribune they send undercover workers into hog confinements whenever they have an opportunity; they say the recordings reveal cruelty that is commonplace in those facilities.

Pork industry representatives call the videos propaganda. Some animal-welfare organizations declare openly that their goal is to end livestock production, not reform it. Many videos feature musical scores and dramatic voice-overs. And the footage released publicly typically shows only a few sensational moments, when hours and even months of activity were filmed.

"To say we caught 12 drunk drivers so everyone's driving drunk, that's really pushing the envelope in terms of credibility," said Charlie Arnot, CEO of The Center for Food Integrity (CFI), an industry-supported group that assembles experts to comment on the animal rights films. "It doesn't mean that there aren't legitimate issues, but it's an overstatement."

The undercover animal welfare videos have changed industry practices but also led to so-called "ag-gag" laws that make it a crime to record audio or take photographs on farms without the owner's consent or to apply for employment under false pretenses. Some laws also require anyone with evidence of animal cruelty to turn it over to authorities within 24 hours, undercutting the groups' ability to continue investigating.

Twenty-five states have attempted to pass such laws and six have succeeded. An Illinois bill was introduced in 2012 but did not pass.

Proponents say the laws protect farmers from misleading publicity while critics say they suppress free speech and criminalize whistleblowers who would expose animal abuse.

The Tribune could identify no undercover animal-rights investigations on hog confinements in Illinois, a state where it is a potential felony to record a conversation without the consent of all parties. Animal welfare groups said they have conducted only limited operations in the state for that reason.

Below are summaries of six instances in which videos had an impact on producers. Viewers considering watching the videos should be aware that they contain graphic images of violence toward animals, disturbing audio and strong language.

•West Coast Farms, 2013, Okfuskee County, Okla. (video by Mercy for Animals)

The facility owner told the Tribune he fired six employees, and the giant food corporation Tyson cut ties with the operation. The owner said he sold his facility weeks later. A panel from CFI said the video captured "abuse and egregious misbehavior by employees."

•MowMar Farms, 2008, Greene County, Iowa (video by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)

Six workers were convicted of livestock abuse or neglect and also were fired, according to files from Greene County District Court and a statement from MowMar Farms that said: "We took steps to correct the issues." One of the processing companies that used the facility, Hormel, called the abuses "completely unacceptable" and adopted a new program to evaluate its suppliers at random. MowMar called the footage "reprehensible" but said it took ownership of the facility after much of the recorded abuse occurred.

•Christensen Farms, 2015, Rock County, Minn. (video by Last Chance for Animals)

Christensen Farms told the Tribune it fired five workers, disciplined five others, stepped up auditing, and improved worker education and training. Local law enforcement authorities investigated, but no charges were filed, according to records from the Rock County attorney's office.

•Seaboard Foods, 2015, Phillips County, Colo. (video by Mercy for Animals)

Seven workers were fired, and Seaboard issued a statement calling the behavior "unacceptable and inexcusable." The company said in that 2015 statement that it was retraining its farm managers. A CFI panel said the video showed sick animals not getting prompt veterinary care and "rough handling" when workers hit pigs with equipment.

•Pipestone System's Rosewood Farms, 2013, Pipestone County, Minn. (video by Mercy for Animals)

The facility said in a news release at the time that it fired one employee, reassigned another and provided additional training for all remaining workers.

•Wyoming Premium Farms, 2012, Platte County, Wyo. (video by Humane Society of the United States)

Seven employees were convicted of animal abuse, Platte County files show. Tyson told the Tribune that it cut ties with the facility and implemented a new animal welfare auditing program. A CFI panel said the video was "an incredibly disturbing, saddening and horrific example of the worst kind of animal handling."

Madison Hopkins is a graduate student at Northwestern University's Medill journalism school who worked with the Tribune as a research assistant.

djackson@chicagotribune.com

Twitter @Poolcar4

Copyright © 2017, Chicago Tribune
Reprinted with permission.

This article is related to: [Crime](#)

Reprinted with permission.

Pork producers defend gestation crates, but consumers demand change



Phil Borgic defends the use of gestation and farrowing crates. His 6,000-animal breeding operation produces 160,000 pigs per year. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

By **David Jackson and Gary Marx**

Chicago Tribune

AUGUST 3, 2016, 4:15 AM

With a gentle, expert touch, pork industry executive Phil Borgic inspects the sow in the tight metal crate.

For almost her entire life, iron bars will hold this mother pig on the slotted concrete floor of Borgic's 6,000-animal breeding operation as she produces litter after litter. She can step a few inches forward or backward but not turn around. Her heaving belly, waving head and dark-rimmed eyes are the only parts she seems free to move.

These enclosures, called gestation crates — and separate farrowing crates that hold sows while they give birth and suckle their newborns — have unleashed a furious battle between pork producers who call

them safe and opponents who say they amount to animal torture.

In public announcements that are reshaping the U.S. pork industry, giant food retailers from McDonald's to Kmart and Safeway have vowed in coming years to stop buying pork from producers that hold breeding sows in crates.

"These social, intelligent, curious animals are put in a coffin for their entire lives. It's hard to imagine a more miserable existence," said Paul Shapiro, vice president of the Humane Society of the United States.

Top U.S. pork producer Smithfield Foods in 2007 announced its transition to "crate-free" pig breeding by 2022; the switch, involving 800,000 sows per year, will cost an estimated \$360 million, according to a company filing with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. Leading pork producer Cargill has said it will by next year convert its own breeding facilities and eliminate contract growers that use crates.

But in Illinois, Borgic is among the influential pig breeders who resist the national trend. He defends the crates as more merciful than the primary alternatives — communal pens or outdoor lots — and says they are critical to holding down the grocery store price of pork, a leading Illinois export and the most widely consumed meat in the world.

All sides of the debate cite studies in support of their positions, though much of the peer-reviewed research about pig well-being in crates is funded by the pork industry in the interest of improving and refining its methods.

Borgic, a board member of the National Pork Producers Council, cited accounts from European breeders whose "free access" arrangements allow sows to choose between group areas and tight stalls. A sow will tend to hang out and sleep in a single compartment, Borgic said — "she feels safe."

Recalling how his family operation began moving pigs from pastures to confinements in the 1970s, Borgic said: "We started using the stalls to protect the sows. I let science and the market tell me what to do. I've done both. I know in my heart and my brain what is better."

His unapologetic defense of maternity crates was shared by other leading Illinois pork producers, who credit the individual stalls for bigger litters, heavier piglets and reduced workforce costs.

"Everybody looks at pigs and thinks of themselves," said David Conrady, whose Logan County-based TriPork Inc. markets nearly 11,000 pigs per year. His animals have hearts similar to humans' and highly evolved minds, he notes, but they are destined to make food, not serve as companions or pets.

"They're raised for a purpose. We've got to feed the world first," Conrady said.

Borgic's football field-long nurseries produce 160,000 pigs per year, sending the weaned piglets to contract growers around the Midwest or to his own confinement facilities.

As he shakes a handful of feed on a newborn's squirming torso to dry its skin, some of his 25 workers hustle through their specialized, assembly-line roles. Two castrate piglet after squealing piglet while others move a male boar on a dolly down the dimly lit rows to ensure the sows are in heat before artificially inseminating them in their 2-by-7-foot crates.

After a few years, when the size of their litters decline, the sows are sent to slaughter and made into Jimmy Dean and Hillshire Farm sausages, Borgic said.

Starting with Florida in 2001, animal rights groups have successfully pushed for legislation banning hog crates in several states, though Ohio is the only one that is among the top 10 states in hog sales, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data.

But American consumers' growing desire for cruelty-free animal handling has influenced food retailers, who in turn are forcing the U.S. industry to change its livestock husbandry practices.

Janeen Johnson, an associate professor of animal sciences at the University of Illinois whose research has been funded in part by the pork industry, criticized retailers for dictating livestock handling practices to producers whose families have been raising pigs for generations.

"The science has not supported change," Johnson said. "If sows are placed in group pens, you're going to see mortality go up and efficiency go down. A lot of these producers may shut their doors."

Placed together in communal settings, sows can fight for food and establish pecking orders in which the weakest eat less, if at all. In the individual crates, feed can be precisely calibrated to the pig's stage in her life cycle, and workers can easily track the well-being of individual animals, the research studies show.

The most advanced group-pen models use electronic ear tags linking sows to feeding systems that dispense the proper meal dose based on the animals' needs, but the machinery is expensive and requires expert workers.

Some researchers have found that sows had the highest stress levels, as measured by cortisol concentrations, when they were introduced to group pens and a pecking order was established. After that, there was little stress-level difference between sows in crates and those in pens.

Some studies have linked the crated sows' lack of exercise to weakened bones, lameness and leg injuries, while others report more foot problems in communal pens with similar concrete floors.

And scientists are split over the significance of certain behaviors seen in crated pigs: chewing compulsively on the metal bars or wagging the head incessantly. These gestures make them look miserable, but studies have found the chewing also can occur in group pens.

djackson@chicagotribune.com

Twitter @poolcar4

gmarx@chicagotribune.com

Twitter @garyjmarx

Copyright © 2017, Chicago Tribune

Reprinted with permission.

New animal abuse allegations surface at Illinois hog confinement



Rodney Beard, shown at his job as a janitor for an Illinois manufacturer, previously worked at Cedarcrest LLC, a 6,400-sow confinement in western Illinois. He said he became a pariah for reporting animal abuse by fellow workers and that he was fired after making a complaint. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

By **David Jackson and Gary Marx**
Chicago Tribune

DECEMBER 28, 2016, 5:11 AM

Illinois' large hog confinements are sealed from the public for biosecurity reasons and often set back on private roads. Their low-paid labor force includes local residents and immigrants who have few other job opportunities and told Tribune reporters they feared retribution if they spoke out.

But as leading pork producer Professional Swine Management expands in Fulton County in western Illinois, three former employees have come forward in interviews with the Tribune to allege livestock abuse at the company's Cedarcrest LLC facility, a 6,400-sow confinement about 7 miles southwest of Lewistown.

One of them, Rodney Beard, said some workers beat the animals with the sharp edges and corners of the large plastic "sort boards" that pig handlers use to guide animals. "Not flat-ways, they'd be doing it sideways," said Beard, 55, lowering his arms in a chopping motion.

"Some of these young kids, they got off on it. They got a thrill out of it," added Beard, who said he worked at Cedarcrest for about three months in 2014.

Beard said he was fired after he reported two workers for beating pigs — then was blamed by the workers for the abuse.

"You're labeled a troublemaker if you go turn people in," he said. "What was (done) in there stayed in there. They stressed that."

Beard's son, Anthony, who said he worked at Cedarcrest from 2011 to 2014, said he also witnessed workers beating pigs with boards and with leather straps when they would not move fast enough.

"If people knew what happens behind closed doors, I guarantee they would look at bacon different," he said.

Former Cedarcrest worker Justin Jockisch, 26, who said he was fired in September following disputes with supervisors, said he witnessed Cedarcrest workers striking pigs "with the metal rods that hold the gates in place. It's every day."

Piglets often huddled around the mother sows when workers tried to move them, Jockisch said, and workers were allowed to guide the animals gently with their rubber work boots. But when the piglets didn't move quickly enough, he said, "you'll see them kick them."

Professional Swine executives declined to comment on the employees or their allegations, but the company has previously told the Tribune that it does not tolerate abuse and did not believe worker accounts of mistreatment.

Former workers can be biased and are likely to embellish because they are angry at their bosses or upset about their experiences, the company has said.

The Tribune reported in August in its "Price of Pork" investigation that workers at Illinois swine confinements rarely file complaints of animal mistreatment with the Illinois Bureau of Animal Health and Welfare, the arm of the state Agriculture Department that oversees animal welfare laws.

The understaffed bureau did not find a single animal welfare infraction or violation at a hog confinement during the past five years, the Tribune found in a review of thousands of pages of bureau records.

One such complaint was filed last year by Sharee Santorineos, who worked at Eagle Point Farms LLC, a 6,000-sow Professional Swine facility also in Fulton County.

Santorineos' three-page letter to the bureau alleged animals were punched, kicked and gouged with metal rods to move them. But Eagle Point executives gave a state bureau inspector a guided tour, and his report was only a few sentences long.

"I did not observe anyone mistreating the animals," it said. "No violations found. Docket is closed."

Professional Swine said in August that it had dismissed four employees in the previous eight months for mistreatment and animal welfare infractions at its 27 facilities in Illinois, Iowa and Missouri.

dyjackson@chicagotribune.com

gmarx@chicagotribune.com

Twitter @poolcar4

Twitter @garyjmarx

Copyright © 2017, Chicago Tribune