

END THE CAGE AGE FOR SOWS



The life of a sow in natural conditions

Pigs are highly intelligent, curious and social, with complex cognitive abilities.

The wild ancestors of farmed pigs evolved to thrive in woodland. In natural conditions, before giving birth to her piglets, a pregnant sow (mother pig) may walk 5-10 km before selecting a sufficiently isolated and protected nest site. She may take 10 hours to build a nest and then completely cover herself in the nest material before giving birth. She stays with her piglets in the nest for two weeks and then they gradually rejoin the herd. The sow has a special 'lactation grunt' for calling her piglets to her to suckle.



Sow and one of her piglets in a woodland farm

The life of a sow in EU farming

Despite the clear importance of movement, communication, family bonds and the need for a sow to nurture rather than simply feed her piglets, in standard commercial pig production the large majority of the EU's 12 million sows spend nearly half of each year in cages:

- the sow stall, in which a sow is confined for five weeks around the time of her insemination; and
- the farrowing crate, in which she is confined for five weeks around the birth of her piglets.

A sow cannot walk or even turn around in either of these cages. She is denied the chance to behave as she has evolved to do. Sows suffer physically and psychologically in cages. It is not a life worth living.

The cycle of pig production typically begins with the confinement of the sow in a sow stall where she is inseminated and kept for five weeks. Her frustration at being confined can lead to abnormal behaviours such as biting the cage bars. She has no space to defecate or urinate away from her resting area and consequently may suffer urinary infections from lying in her own waste.

After five weeks in the sow stall she should be released into group (non-caged) housing with other sows, but it is unclear how well this provision is enforced.



The deprivation and chronic stress of the cage cause abnormal 'bar-biting' and depression

About a week before giving birth, she will be shut in a metal farrowing crate. She cannot build a safe nest to give birth to her piglets, as she would do in nature, and can only suckle her piglets through the bars. At about four weeks of age, her piglets are removed, she is re-inseminated and the caged cycle begins again.

Sow in a farrowing crate - unable to turn around or properly nurture her piglets



More humane systems are economically viable and are in use

Alternatives to sow stalls: 3.5 million sows in the EU are already successfully kept in groups during pregnancy, in indoor and free-range systems. Sweden, Norway and the UK have banned sow stalls completely and Germany will phase them out by 2028. Enlightened businesses are rejecting stalls too.



Alternative to farrowing crates: An estimated 1.5 million farrowing sows are successfully kept in enriched environments whilst farrowing and suckling their piglets. With space and bedding, they can perform their instinctive nesting behaviours before giving birth.

Sow and piglets safely together and foraging outdoors

EU legislation to End the Cage Age for sows

Council Directive 2008/120/EC on the protection of pigs provides for a partial ban on sow stalls in the EU. Compassion in World Farming calls for an end to the use of sow stalls and farrowing crates by 2027.

This could be included in a revision of Directive 98/58/EC on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes. The Directive stipulates that “the freedom of movement of an animal ... must not be restricted to cause unnecessary suffering”. It also states that “where an animal is continuously or regularly confined, it must be given the space appropriate to its physiological and ethological needs in accordance with established experience and scientific knowledge.”

Confining sows to narrow stalls and crates does not fulfil these requirements.

Additionally, Article 13 TFEU requires “the Union and member states, since animals are sentient beings, to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals.”

To do so, the Commission must take the initiative to bring in and enforce an EU-wide ban on the use of sow stalls and farrowing crates. It should support higher-welfare, well-managed systems that do not use cages.

The vast majority of EU citizens demand reform for farmed animals; the 2016 Eurobarometer poll on animal welfare shows that 94% think protecting the welfare of farm animals is important and the recent [End the Cage Age European Citizens' Initiative](#) has gathered well over the required one million validated signatures from across the EU.

It is time to End the Cage Age.

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