



Food Animal Initiative

ENVIRONMENTS FIT FOR ANIMALS FIT FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT

FAI Technical Datasheet G2 - The importance of maintaining animals in peer groups - Update August 2005

At FAI we are interested in providing animals with the things that are important to them. It is known that farm animals form social groups and the concept of a pecking order is well understood. In current commercial systems animals are frequently regrouped several times in their lives for convenience or for reasons which are intended to improve performance e.g. in order to feed a group of thinner animals better. This must always be balanced against the stress to the animals where the pecking order has to be re-established. Stress can occur when animals are mixed or even when animals are removed from a group as this still changes the pecking order.

'the facts.....'

Examples of situations where animals are mixed are numerous and the value of maintaining peer groups is undervalued currently as the benefits are not perceived to outweigh the costs. In some circumstances fundamental changes within a system would have to be made in order to gain the benefits. At FAI we are in the process of demonstrating the benefits that these changes can bring to both animal and man. We are aiming to achieve maintenance of peer groups across all systems and have started with those areas where the greatest benefits could be demonstrated i.e. in the rearing of pigs and beef from the dairy unit. Current systems have the following inherent problems:

Piglets are generally mixed at weaning and then often again at around 35kg and then social groups are disturbed several times over a period of about a month as pigs are drawn and sent to slaughter. Pigs are overtly aggressive to each other and it is common to have to remove pigs from a batch to prevent bullying. Pigs that are reared together from birth establish a pecking order when they are very young and are not able to do each other significant damage¹.

Dairy calves are mixed shortly after birth in most instances as they are reared artificially in groups of varying sizes and may come from several farms. They are often then mixed again as they move to a finishing farm and may be re-mixed on that farm as the larger animals go to slaughter. This can have a detrimental effect on growth rate, disease levels and meat quality. Meat quality is damaged as the animals are developing a new pecking order in the period immediately prior to slaughter which is stressful².



Montbeliarde calves in stable group

'.... the FAI response!'

At FAI we work to set up systems where animals remain with their peers throughout life. Examples of where this has been achieved are;

Sows live in family groups and their piglets are reared in peer groups from birth to death. Damage levels on these pigs are below commercial recorded figures.¹

Dairy calves are received on site as weaned calves and are kept in these peer groups through until slaughter.

Every effort is made to ensure that animals meet market specification as a single group. This is not always practical and when this happens remaining animals are moved together to a smaller pen. Moving animals within their family group is not stressful.

It has been found that animals reared in the above way have growth rates which match or exceed top commercial levels and the maintenance of peer groups appears to be a significant factor. Pigs have routinely achieved daily liveweight gains (DLWG) of 0.8kg per day and cattle average 1.5kg per day. Meat quality has been shown to be above average in taste trials³.

1 Jo Scott Oxford, Zoology Undergraduate supervised by Marian Dawkins 2004

2 Meat quality

3 Lucy Goodchild, Harper Adams, Undergraduate 2004



Core Sponsors of FAI

