

ESF Training for Gilts

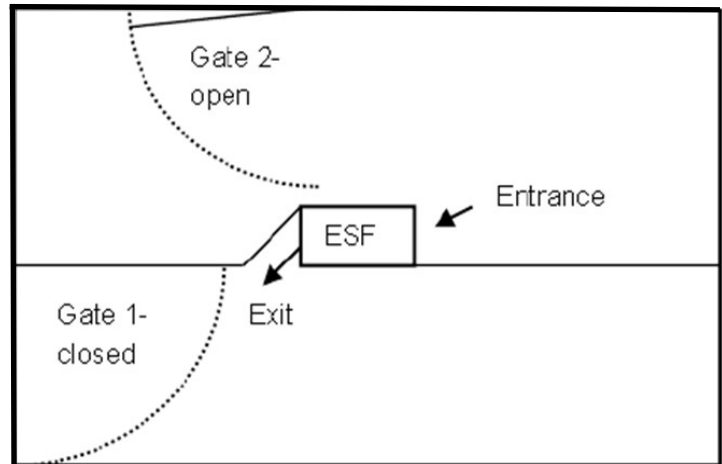
The training of gilts (and initial training of sows) is one aspect of ESF systems that can be overlooked. The sow herd and gilt replacements must be initially trained before being put into ESF systems. Training should not be ignored; if it is farms will require increased labour to push animals through the feeder, there will be a higher incidence of returns to estrus and the ESF will not function as designed.

One to two weeks should be allowed for gilt training, depending on the system design. The stockperson(s) in charge should be those with the best animal handling skills. It is essential the stockperson be patient and that gilts do not have a negative experience with ESF.

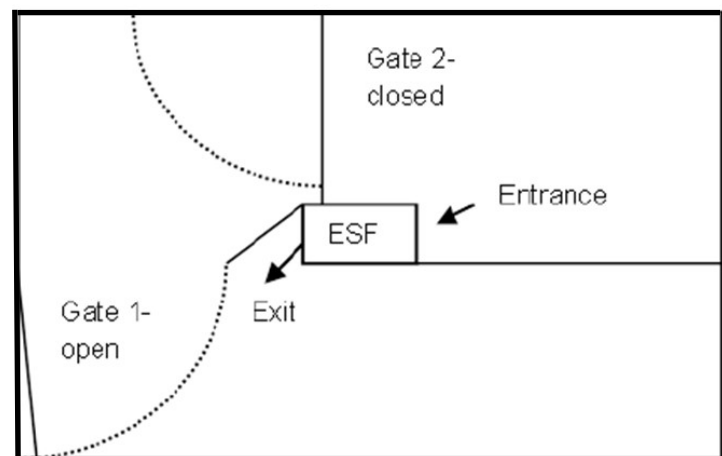
A separate ESF pen should be used to train the gilts. The ESF should ideally be smaller to match the gilt size, and only 30-40 gilts should be kept in the pen rather than filling it to the maximum ESF capacity. Initially, the entrance gates can be tied open and the exit can be left partially open as well. As the gilts become used to the feeder, the gates can be gradually shut. Pen dividers should be used to keep track of the gilts using the system and to reduce the amount of space on the entrance side to encourage entry into the feeder.

A less costly training alternative is a pen divided by separated entrance and exit gates, similar to the ESF gates. Feed is on one side and water on the other, so gilts must pass through the gates to access both. To begin, the gates are left partially open to encourage gilts to pass through. As the gilts become accustomed to the gates, the gates can be closed as in the actual ESF operation.

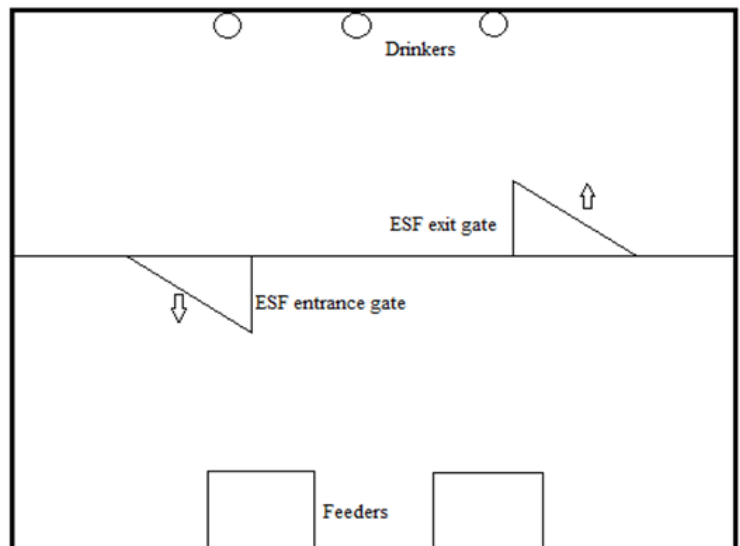
Along with learning to use the ESF system, gilts should learn to socialize before entering group pens. For gilts raised in groups, that may be sufficient. However, there is some benefit from placing gilts in a pen adjacent to the sow group they will be mixed with, especially if there are bars between pens to allow contact. Housing the gilts separately, or only with first parity sows may help to reduce aggression, and may benefit the more submissive animals.



Early in the day all gilts are moved to the entrance area, and gates positioned to give more room near the entrance.



As the day progresses, gilts move through the feeder to the exit side. Gates are adjusted to allow more space in the exit area, crowding animals on the entrance side.



Alternative training pen using just the gates from the ESF.