2016 Group Sow Housing Seminar
Discussion Panel 1: Sept 6, 2016

Panel Members: Doug Ahrens, Adam Schlegel, Jennifer Brown, Julie Menard, Geert Geene, John Van Engelen

(Edited for clarity and conciseness)

Moderator: We're going to have a panel come up here now. People who work in loose sow housing, people who have loose sow housing and have worked with it for a while. And we're going to ask them to come up here so you can ask them questions about what works. So, Jennifer Brown, Julie Menard, John Van Engelen, Doug Ahrens, Adam Schlegel, and Geert Geene, can you come up here?

Just while you're thinking of some really embarrassing and pressing questions, I'm going to ask each member of this panel to simply introduce themselves and tell us a little bit about what system they have, whether it was a renovation or a purpose-built barn, and how specifically they feed in there, and we'll stop with their production numbers.

Doug: We're at about 600 sows. Our facility was a new facility. We traditionally always had a loose housing barn to some description. Was and old finishing barn with small pens. So it wasn't new. We went to a completely dynamic system where we have all our sows in one pen, right from bred gilts to eighth parity sows or better. Feeding system is an electronic sow feeder, and we feed one ration. When we built the barn, we were over 700 sows and we're down to 600 now, and we're producing, we're cresting at 27 and a half pigs weaned per sow, now, at this point. Our biggest problem is we do not have enough sows to feed all the pigs, so I would ask genetic companies to make an ultimate milking sow that could milk for 12 months, because we need those sows to feed 17 pigs off these sows. That's kind of where we're at.

Adam: So, my name's Adam Schlegel. The sow barn where we have loose housing has about 1800 sows in it. And it's actually a retrofit, though. Initially it was about an 1100 sow capacity. The barn itself was built in 1979 and the farrowing rooms were part of the original structure of that barn. So, those farrow rooms were worn out. We actually ended up building a new farrowing wing onto the barn to expand, and then the old farrowing wing became our new loose housing area. So right now, we have 500 spaces of loose housing within that barn. They're on the Canarm Sow Choice ESF system and frankly, they're working really well and we've learned a lot during the transition process, and now production numbers in that facility are pushing 30 PSY for both the stall housed sows and the ones in loose housing.

Jennifer: Jennifer Brown. So, I've got, working in a research barn, so it's not the same as in a commercial barn because we're always doing something

different, but we've got 350 sows. We've got a free access stall system. Ejberg Denmark produced those stalls and we built that barn in 2008, and so we are getting 30 pigs per sow per year and have been for the last couple years. But we've got extra barn staff, more than you would have in any commercial barn, but we're doing pretty well with that.

Julie: My name is Julie Menard, I'm from the F. Menard system in Quebec. We have two barns, actually in loose sow housing. We have one that is a renovation where we increased the weaning age, so we took the opportunity to build a barn where we have a shoulder system with pens of 12 sows. And our other system is a brand new barn that we built in 2015, which 2700 sow barn, which is on the Gestal system. We have 18 sows per pen. And in both of them, like in the younger parity, we're around 28.5 and for the other one, we're at 28, and I would say that the problem in the one with the small pens, is lower farrowing rate problems than the potential of that barn. So this is it.

Geert: Geert Geene, from Amberly. We have around 1250 sows and we have pens. There's pens of roughly 15 sows. That's what we designed it for, which would've made it 18.5 square feet per sow. Lately I've been putting up to 18 in the pen and I find aggressions gone down a little bit with that. We have a trough feeding system. I was feeding 3 times a day, now we're back down to 2 times a day, and I found that reduced aggression a little bit. And I just switched over to batch farrowing, so it makes it easier to select equal sized pigs to put in the pens. And, it's just a little busy sometimes. We're about 25 pigs per sow, I think, right now, because we've been struggling with PRRS. PRRS came in 2013, then got rid of it, then mutated in the finisher environment and got back in. We built a barn in 2012, I should add that. And I'm in house multiplication and through PRRS breaks, I wasn't allowed to keep as many gilts, so I got about 300 sows that are still parity 9 going on parity 10 right now.

John: John Van Engelen. 240 sows right now. It was a retrofit. The barn was actually built in '83, so that was originally a finishing barn, European style with front trough feeding system. It was switched to sow stalls in '96 and then I took out, just when I did the renovations for my ESF, all I did was take out the hallway and pour a cap over the existing cement. So it was not hard to do the renovation. I think the sows really enjoy the solid cement. But for me it was an easy renovation and worked very well and has continually worked very well. My production right now is, I'm weaning at 23 days, I'm weaning an 8.6 kg pig. I'm weaning about 11 pigs per sow. Around 26 pigs per sow per year right now. My true evaluation is sometimes we're raising too many pigs per sow. I think my true evaluation of pigs to the market is how much meat per ton of feed, so that gives a true evaluation of how efficient, how many pigs you're losing, how much feed you're wasting. Basically, how fast you're growing.

Moderator: Okay, questions from the audience?

Audience: **So, obviously, there's a lot of excitement around ESF systems and the ability you have to track a lot more information and use that data to get a customised feed ration per sow, but from your experience, especially people that have had those systems for quite some time, what is the upkeep cost of them? Because everything obviously does have a cost and with the more elaborate ones, do you need to have specialised repairs, or can you handle all of that yourselves?**

Moderator: I think that's for everybody.

Doug: We stayed with the single ration with the time that we did our research. I should say we did ours about four years ago, we built it. And it's a Weda system out of Germany. It's worked well, but from the information we had when we researched, the two years previous before we built, we were lacking in what we could gain for knowledge on the system, so we stayed with a one feed system. The feeding part of it actually works fairly well. It's amazing how the sows themselves can wreck just about anything. They bust gates off, they can find tight screws and make them loose. We spend about an extra man day a week in our barn compared to what we used to, and we actually have less sows. Not all of that goes to maintenance on the systems, but I would have to say that ultimately at the end of the day, we've probably spent more on our stations in three years, four years, than we spent on our stall barn in the last 20. So, it's like a robotic milker in a dairy barn. At the end of the day, you're going to have to maintain these things and keep them up. Air cylinders, switches, electronics. There's a lot of stuff to go wrong. And it hasn't been a cake walk, I'll put it that way. But ultimately it's amazing how efficient they are at feeding sows when they're working properly, and feeding the sow individually and knowing what she's being fed and that she's ate it all, too, so that's probably the most information that I could really say about the system. I don't think any of the other ones would be any different.

Adam: So our system's been in for a year now. It's a little tricky for me to talk about ongoing costs versus starting costs. What can say is we're feeding based on body condition score and that works really well. Said this before, but the tricky part about changing your ration based on body condition score in a large pen full of sows is going back to find a girl that used to be thin, when she's ideal. You want to catch her before she gets fat. As far as maintenance, there's always little things that go wrong. Doors, hinges, springs, this, that, and the other thing. For something specialised like a piece of electronics, it's important to me to have parts on the shelf or parts on my supplier's shelves, rather than parts sitting over in Europe somewhere, or something like that. And that's frankly one of the advantages of the systems we chose. Time will tell.

Julie: If I don't talk about the ESF, I talk about the small pens. But it's for sure that it's very hard when you have like, 12 or something like that. Yeah, we get a lot of aggressions, a lot of fighting, and we increase the feed,

try to decrease the fighting, but now I got a herd of elephants and they are so big in that barn. Last summer I hired a student to follow that, trying to find out what we can do to decrease aggression.

So what is for sure, the cost of feed in these small pens is much higher than in ESF system. Like my colleague, my ESF system just started. I had my first farrowing's last September, 2015. So when you're going with this system, what I have noticed is that in every system you will have to tune yourself. And I don't think we have 100% of the answers to all of the systems right now, it's too new. We're still on the learning curve. I learned quite a lot in the last 2 years and what I knew before and I still have a lot to learn. And what I know is that it's very costly to go in these type of barns, that's for sure. I know that have to be, to make my company to make money because it costs so much that my goal is really to make it produce at the maximum. But since the start, we just tune up almost every week or so, but I think that we can reduce our feeding costs. I think that we will produce as much as any of my other sow farms. But it's a lot of work. You have to be open-minded to work on this and improve, but yeah, I think that it's too quick to say. My barn costs too much to tell you right now that you know, it's an investment that we did. More like research right now, and we are collecting data before going further in the process.

Geert: We just have the trough feeding, so it's just a chain system. Gone through a bit of actuator cable. One or two motors. And yeah, if the chain breaks, you just got to find where it broke and put it back together and that's about it. But it seems to break on a weekend the most when it does.

John: I actually haven't had too much problems with mine. Most of my problems have been actually with my turbine and interference with technology. As far as replacement parts, all I've replaced so far is about three springs. My system runs on air. If I do have a problem, my assistant sends me email. So, pretty much it has been pretty good, other than, like I said, the problems with the interference that I'm having with my turbine and some other minor issues basically dealing with the program itself. Other than that, it's been pretty much maintenance free, for me. My system is a Nedap system from Europe.

Moderator: Question?

Audience: Yeah, I have a question. For any of you on the panel that have put systems in. If you've got one word of advice for someone going out and looking at systems, knowing that there's kind of either drive in-back out or walk through feed systems, knowing what's out there now, what word of advice would you give people looking to go and buy something?

Moderator: I think everybody should try to answer that.

Adam: I've got an answer, but it's a little bit pithy. You need to figure out what's going to work for the flow of your barn. There are times when batch housing makes sense. I've got large dynamic groups, it made sense for me. In my particular case, I've got an existing footprint doing a renovation and I'm trying to maximise the productivity I can get for the existing building, and large, dynamic groups just made sense. And when you flow out from there, all of the other decisions that I made sort of keyed into that. So, you really have to think about how animals move through your whole system, how you're going to be managing. How you work with your barn staff, too. Those are the primary drivers of what systems going to be right for you and what's going to succeed and what's going to fail.

Doug: For us, with the smaller herd, we went to the dynamic system where we have a large group of animals, 300. And we add and take from that group every week. Aggression is very, very minimal. We did that for one reason, because we wanted to maximise the feeder rate. So there was 65 animals on feeder, we wanted to maximise that feeder and didn't know how to do it in small groups when you were going to be adding animals because we don't batch farrow. That may be something in the cards down the road. One thing that I did look at was I wanted a system that I knew what the animal was getting fed, so that animal, once it's in the feeder, which can be a challenge sometimes until they get going. At least you know she ate what she was supposed to eat, right? And if you failed, that's your problem, but she will eat what she's supposed to eat.

Jennifer: At Prairie Swine, as I said we have the free access stalls, but certainly I've been in a lot of other barns and observed, and your question seemed to be related to the walk-through feeders versus backing out?

Audience: Yeah, wanted a word of advice. You know, there's two types of systems that are being floated out there.

Jennifer: Sure. And certainly, some of the earlier ESF systems, sows had to back out and there was a big issue around vulva biting, and so that was a concern certainly when these free access ESF systems like the Gestal came out, was that going to be an issue, was it going to be a problem with sows waiting at the entrance to the stall and biting and aggressing sows as they're trying to back out? And certainly, the farms that I've seen, I haven't seen that because the density is usually, you know, 15 sows per feeder, so there's lots of time for sows to get in and out of those feeders. I really haven't seen that as an issue in these barns. I've seen it more with underfed ESF sows with those sort of issues, unfortunately at the feeder entrance, when they're exiting that far side, than I have with the Gestal system.

Julie: First of all, why I was afraid of other ESF system as compared to Gestal is that I said well, if I have just one feeder, let's say for 60 or 80 sows and during the weekend or at Christmas time, something break. You know, I was afraid that all the animals don't eat, so I was feeling more

comfortable with Gestal because I was having different feeders. In our barn, I really put the secure, safe side, so I have one unit for 16 sows.

And if one breaks, like I have five in a pen of 80. So if I have one going off, then I still have four, which makes one feeder for 20. Why also we wanted to try it is that it was easier for the training. For the gilts. And this I was a bit afraid with the people. Right now I would be less afraid trying to train the gilts, but what is for sure, this was one other thing which attracted me. It was easier to train the gilts, so I said well, it will be easier. In the past we were getting some aggression, so some sows going to the feeder and the dominant sows or the bully sow are going to bite, and then the smaller one was going out. Now they adjust a door, so that it's less easy for the more aggressive sows to intimidate the less bully sow. So I have no, no experience with one-way through, with the other ESF. My experience is now with the Gestal seems to be fine with going in front and going on the back end. I mean, all animals are eating everything and we can track them very quickly on the computer.

But I really think one of the most important things, I think the large pen I'm not afraid much that they're for reducing aggressions because they have more space, but the way you put your laying area, where you put your area where they can run all over, where you put your water in the post, where you put your feeders, all this are very, very important for the behaviour of the sows in the pen. And this is for everyone the most important things how you put your space of all these different area.

Geert: I don't know, if I ever went ESF then I'd probably go with the walk-through system just so that you can sort them, whatever you want to do with them. If I went that way, I'd probably go large group so then you probably just want to set it up so that you don't have to find all those sows. But for our system, I could see benefits from having freedom access stalls so if you have a problem with a certain sow, you don't have to pull it out of the pen. Cause that's my issue now, if I have to pull one out of the pen and if she's injured, she's going to eat up a spot somewhere else in the barn.

John: What I would say actually is a training area, which is actually very critical for getting them trained for the ESF and if you set it up right, the sows will train themselves. It's just in how you really do set these things up and keeping track of what's being trained in, like that. What I actually do for myself is my gilts are right beside my weaned sows, the sows that get weaned end up being right beside them, so it actually brings in the gilts in heat along with everything else. I feed them gilts on the floor, but in order to get water, they have to go through the one-way gates, and the one-way gates represent the gates that they have to go through of the ESF. They start open, as they get more comfortable with the area that they're in, you put the springs on the gates, which represent them, to the ESF that they're going to be going through, and so all these things that create less stress for the animals, creates less stress for you. I always say to people, one bad attitude with an animal is two more for

you. So, if you treat them right and let them train themselves, things go a lot easier. That's what I really have to say.

Moderator: Yes? Question?

Audience: I just have a question for each of you. How do you guys manage your gilts, and do you believe in crate-breaking?

John: So, when I'm training my gilts and they know the gate system and they know how to go through the gate system, in and out, after that period, they go into a stall and they're fed in the stalls and that breaks them for the farrowing crate. When I didn't do that at first, I really got a state of depression with some of my gilts that got into a farrowing crate and they were pretty stressed out. So actually putting them in a crate and then feeding them in a crate actually works as well for the ESF because then they realise when they're in ESF, they get all fed at that one time, too. So that actually solves two problems at once. They get crate-breaken and then they get used to being fed all at once, at one time, in the stall itself. So they're used to that. So when I started doing these things, these little details actually make a very big difference in all of your training.

Audience: And, John, how long do you crate break them for?

John: Generally, at least a week, maybe two, three, whatever works out for the system that you got. But it should be at least a week.

Doug: We built a gilt facility a year and a half ago, and in there we put in the identical feeder that we actually have on the sows. We put plastic pallet in the side of it because it was too big for gilts, so we used to get two and three and turned upside down and everything else, so we had to make it a little bit smaller on the inside. We used a series of gates. We start them at about 150 days on that, of age, and we take them until about 200 days on that. So they're on it for 50 to 60 days max, likely. And we use a series of gates to train them. Water on one side, crowd them up, work their way through. And usually within a week a new group of gilts will be pretty much all eating without too much problem or a whole lot of work. Like John, I find that if you let them do the work themselves, they usually adjust to it a little bit better. We have enough gilts now to the point that if one doesn't want to work with me, I don't want to work with it either. It just causes problems down the road. We are stall training, we take them at about 200, 210 days, wait for their first heat in a stall, and then we actually move them to the breeding row, which the stall they stand in for that first year is in the same row as the breeding row. They're there for 35 days after they're bred also. So ours are in for about 50 days. Now, we also did try it without crate breaking and stall breaking, and that is a disaster. We had gilts get out of farrowing crates and upset farrowing crates, and they get in the pit and they're out of the slots and it's, it just is not worth the short fall.

Adam: So, from a training point of view, we are probably doing it entirely wrong. I've got a sub-pen within one of my two large pens that I can segregate animals for, and I can sort animals back into that as needed. I can load up a batch of new sows to train, and the way my flow works or the way my pens work, I can actually segregate the rest of the group from all four of my ESF stations on any one side. And just coax the animals through the stations. Frankly that works really well. The first day they go through, you know, we'll load them into the training pen, let them acclimatise. They'll go in full, they'll be hungry by the time 24 hours has passed. And then if you put them in front of a station, they'll typically go inside looking. They can smell feed. That will work for 90% of the animals over the course of about 3 days. By doing it this way, I can train a batch of 30 girls in an hour a day, an hour and a half a day. It's actually not that bad. The key here is, though, we're not putting gilts in our ESF system if we don't have to. So I've got a separate gilt breeding facility where I can keep them segregated. That works the same way as it does for the animals that are destined for the stall portion of our flow.

They'll get bred there, they'll do their first gestation through there, they'll go into the farrowing crates and then that's when we'll start to look at putting them into the system. So from that perspective, because we do it that way, these animals aren't scared of stalls and that helps with the subsequent training process. Longer term, we are looking at redoing some of that gilt barn and acclimatising gilts and training them, so that's a question you'll have to ask me again next year.

Jennifer: Maybe with your ESF feeders, it might be similar for sows to access them because there's no difficult gates that they need to push sideways.

Adam: Yeah, that's actually a really good point. One of the key features of my ESF system is a powered entrance gate. So what that means is the sows don't actually have to learn they have to push against something, it's just an open path that they know they can walk through if they've been through a hallway or anything like that. And again, it smells like feed so they know what they're getting. Sows are smart. They'll figure it out.

Jennifer: Yeah, so I think that helps in training for your system for sure. So I forgot, at Prairie Swine Centre, we do have two rooms, finisher rooms that we converted to Gestal feeders. So gilts in that room, we actually move them in there the week before the rest of parities come in and because we have such a small herd, we've got multiple parities in each grouping. Right now I think we're putting in over 30 pigs per room with two Gestal feeders. But yeah, by having the gilts in there for a week ahead of time, it gives us a chance to make sure they're onto the feeder before the bigger ladies come in and intimidate them.

But certainly, when Europe went to ESF systems, there was a number of problems with gilts being introduced to a crate for the first time in farrowing and, yeah, bad results there. So I think that crate training is essential early on, before they're bred.

Julie: All my systems I have worked with what we call quarantine or isolation. I mean, I only turn gilts every two months, and I have two months of being quarantine where because we're in the first positive system that always bring them back to PRRS they're getting after the break, but. So we enter them in these kind of quarantine which are joined to the barn. We detect the heat in these quarantine or isolations. We detect heat and we make them bred at 235-240 days. So it's the same with my both of these farms. So in the ESF, our Gestal barn, we have group of 50 we have in these, so I have like, 200 space there, once every two months. We have 8 unit for 50 sows to get them trained within a week. They have learned to get into these feeders, and when they took the heat, we take them over there.

We have been vaccinating them in the gilt finishing barn before, so no stress that they learn to eat very quickly. And after that, after one day they are to come, we detect the first heat. And then we bring them to the crate place, put them there. When we come back in heat, we bring them so they can be between 1 to 3 weeks in the crates. We keep them for 28 days and we have gestation just for parity 1, and gestation for parity 2 and plus.

So we separate our parity 1 from the rest of the herd. I value that health wise, but also for management, they are completely different from older sows to manage, so you can feed them different, manage them differently.

Geert: We check and bring all our gilts to the pens and then ideally move them to stalls. But there was 30 gilts roughly that I didn't have enough gilt stalls for them. I have 20-inch-wide gilt stalls. I don't like putting them in sow stalls cause sometimes they turn around, and then the more you come in, the ones that are in the bigger stall, they're red around the necks cause they're trying to turn around. But these 30 gilts that I did not stall train, they had some depression after farrowing and some I had to nurse off and a lot of them went off feed just because it was all new to them and it was very stressful.

Moderator: Okay. Another question?

Audience: When it comes to pre-farrowing vaccinations, how do you handle that with these large groups?

Adam: So, for me, it's actually fairly easy. It's all about the computer knows when they're bred. You put in a vaccination protocol and you can either mark these animals as they go through in a given day, or you can sort them out and just deal with a sorted batch, put them back in. So it's really straight forward.

Doug: We do it the same way. We have a paint marker on our main selection area and we'll use it at that day too, so anybody that's due for a vaccination will get their neck painted. Then we know exactly who we're after. But we actually select them and put them in the holding

area, is what we do. In that holding area, we also have some more gates that we can make the group of 40 animals or whatever it is that needs to be vaccinated into smaller groups so that they don't crowd when you're vaccinating. That's generally not a fun day for anybody. Looking at trying to make a chute system, some way of finding them individually. Not sure how to do it yet. We tried painting them and letting them out into the bigger group. That works good for probably 50% of the sows, but all it takes is one not to like you and then you got the whole barn not liking you, either. So, one thing we do is vaccination day, we wear different coloured coveralls. So when we put on our orange coveralls, they can see us, they know we're coming. But you have to differentiate yourself because they realise that, they think that you're coming for them on a normal day, too, if you don't change colours. That's something we found has alleviated stress.

Julie: I think it's very important question because in my case I really try to minimise the number of vaccinations, and what I did try is to reduce as much of the vaccination either the farrowing crates or in the first 28 days that they are in crates. And when we have to do it, we do it like the pre-farrowing, let's say, e. coli or whatever vaccination, we'll go in the pen in the afternoon and all the animals are laying down, very quiet. And when the people are good with the sows, they will not move. You just go very, very smoothly. But I mean, I will not do three times vaccinations because like you said, when you put the different coveralls they will see you very well in that lens, so really going very smoothly and the people on the farm are very, very smooth.

Geert: We have small pens. I just kind of stand in the middle and let one go by at a time and I jab them with the needle. That's it.

John: I'm not using too many vaccines. But I can do the exact same thing. I got three different spray markers on the system. I can sort them, I can do whatever you want. Put it in the computer and they can be sorted. Right now, we automatically spray-mark pigs for preg checks each week and we just walk around and do preg checks while they're laying down. The animals are very docile. You'll walk around there enough times during the day and they just accept you. So I don't vaccinate per se inside, I'm actually probably not vaccinating when I probably should be, but I am actually vaccinating when I wean, so for me that works pretty good. And they're not getting out of the crate, so before they pull out of the crate, we vaccinate. And we don't have to vaccinate the ones we're culling either.

Moderator: Another question? Heading towards the end of the evening here. You want a question, you're going to have to either buy a beer or ask it now.

Audience: So just for an ending question, then, for each one of you, for a problem, what was a real surprise to you? What's the big surprise that was most annoying for you?

Moderator: **I'm just going to add to your question. What was the biggest positive surprise and negative surprise, okay? Yeah. Two surprises, one good one, one bad one.**

John: I can start. I'll tell you, my biggest problem I had before I went to the ESF was my toes and feet. I had extremely wild growing toes on my sows, and right now I virtually only think I got about two sows with a couple of toes that are problems. I really have worn down the toes and feet, I think they're in better condition. So for me, that has been one of the big positives.

I find in an ESF, if you actually look at the barns and the ESF, or now these barns that don't have the drops all over the place, you don't have a lot of dust collection anymore because the drops in these barns are all dust collectors, cobwebs and everything like this. Now it's just like your kitchens these days, it's open concept. So I mean, it's a lot easier to clean these barns, a lot easier to do maintenance and you're not looking around a whole bunch of obstacles. I find that refreshing, I guess, for me. I also put in some windows, so it gives me a little bit more environment.

Doug: One of the positive surprises for us was that these animals actually have a personality to the point that they can think. When they were in a stall, you fought with them on every corner, every shadow, and every draft, and now they're fluid when they move. When we're going farrowing crates, they have to come up one hallway within our gestation stall barn and we can let 10 of them into that hallway, and by the time, after they're running and I'm running cause the last thing I want them to do is have one turn around at the far end on me, they're all standing in farrowing crates. They've been out of the stall for how long, but they all go to farrowing crates like you wouldn't believe. Even the gilts.

Doesn't seem to make sense to me, but that's what they seem to like. Probably the most challenging surprise was, is that these animals get to be very street smart and they're very opportunistic. And you give them all day to do that. They can outsmart you pretty much any week of the year. You can take an opportunity away and they will figure out of a way of getting that opportunity back or create a new one. So, you're always on your toes trying to think ahead of them of how they're going to use the system and how you're going to have to tweak it.

Adam: So I would second what Doug just said about sows from the ESF systems moving really well through the barn into crates. But I'm not going to cop out and use that as my positive surprise. I think, when I was doing a lot of research before this project started, I was really worried about the initial fill. Trying to train 500ish animals to use these systems, or else they don't get fed. And so there's certainly a lot of work involved in getting them initially trained. The other fear, of course, is putting 250 sows in a pen and me not having anything to sort of judge against, I expected them to fight like mad. And frankly, that didn't happen. There's a little bit of scrapping in the pens but by and large,

they get their social order sorted out and then they'll wander off. They're laying down most of the time. And you can walk through the pen. They're not running, they're just, oh, it's you again. I'm not even going to bother getting up. So, yeah, just how smart these animals are and they train really easy. And they like it in the group situation. .

From the negative point of view, we have all kinds of start-up problems. Not all of them were technical. In fact, most of them probably weren't. But one of the most frustrating ones, one of the technical problems that took us the longest to resolve was actually an interference problem. So John has mentioned his windmill. For me, my interference was caused by my well pump. It's a variable frequency driver that messed up all my ESF stations for weeks until we thought to look at it. As soon as we found the problem, you can isolate it. That's well understood. Costs a little bit of money to do, and once that's in, the stations work perfectly. But that initial start-up is a little bit frustrating when something's gone wrong and you can't fix it yourself.

Jennifer: So yeah, I think I mentioned what was the most positive thing that I've seen lately. Certainly, yeah, our barn, free access stall system, it works very smoothly, but it's so much like stalls in so many ways. So, yeah, the most positive thing I would say is that early mixing study. It was a bit of a surprise how well sows adapted to that early mixing procedure.

And I didn't include the data on gilts in those early mixing versus late mixing resocialization treatments. But the gilts in the early mix treatment, so they went straight into the group pen, not from farrowing of course, cause they're gilts, but every gilt in that early-mix treatment caught, every gilt in that group got bred the first time. Whereas all the other late mixing treatments, we had repeats in gilts. So, obviously that stimulation of being in a social group was helpful for their cycle. So yeah, how easy that was and then certainly, in other meetings I've been to, clearly there's a lot of producers who are going to that earlier mixing. Mostly just after insemination. So seeing that as a big change across the industry, it's quite interesting and exciting.

And in terms of a negative, with our system, free access stalls have always been criticised for, you know, well, sows spend an awful lot of their time in those stalls and so we've been trying to do some studies on what can you do to encourage sows to actually use the group space. So we're not there yet. Basically the younger animals like to stay in the stalls and the big ones kind of dominate the open space. And what we can do to kind of equalise that and kind of get gilts to be more active in that system. Yeah, we haven't found the solution yet. But, it does give us good production.

Julie: What I really like about that system is that the animals are very calm. It's very pleasant to work with, not like when you come in the gestation barn and everybody squeal. Everybody's quiet. They are quiet in gestation, they are quiet in farrowing house. It's so fun and it makes other people even more happy to work with it. I mean, you have no

stress. Even for the pigs and for the people. So this is a very positive part I would say, so it's almost relaxing even if we have to work quite hard.

The challenge, one of my challenge has been, it's weird but I'm also a vet. And we had some rotavirus type C problem in all the first-term pigs, and usually my protocol was to give feedback from piglets who are starting to scour and my protocol was like one intestine for 35 sows, you know? And I was doing it every week, 5 weeks, up to the time that they go into the farrowing house and it was resolving over like 3 to 4 weeks. But the challenge with these big pens, how do you give feedbacks equally to every sow? I can tell you it's a big, big challenge for a vet trying to do equal feedback of materials to aid the sows within the pen.

Geert: Well, when we had to do a feedback, I just turned the feed off for a day and I just put it in the trough and then I dropped the feed on overtop of that. That was when we had PED, but they weren't really eating the first day anyway, so. They didn't even really care that the feed was off. My biggest negative surprise would've been how much went wrong when the barn was new. Just the design of little things. Like the way the drops were made, they were made out of PVC pipes. The gilts broke that before they were sows, didn't even take three months before all the pipes started breaking. So they put all new pipes in. and the floats were put too low. Just little things. And then, I guess, the biggest problem with my feed system I find is when the feeds not dropping, you have to go outside and shove it back in. The feed system has been really, really reliable for us. It's only broke a couple times.

And it's really nice to see how well the sows move. When I'm making pens, I just have a clipboard and that's my board. I just use it and block their eye and they'll turn around and they just kind of move, motor along. Didn't struggle at all, really.

Moderator: Okay, I'd like to thank the audience very much. I think that, thanks to you, those were good questions and we got some good answers and a range of answers from everybody here.

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