

# Influencing the transition to free and ‘flexible’ systems for farrowing and lactating sows



**Dr Emma M. Baxter**  
Scotland's Rural College  
West Mains Road  
Edinburgh, EH9 3JG, Scotland  
Email: [Emma.Baxter@sruc.ac.uk](mailto:Emma.Baxter@sruc.ac.uk)

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## Introduction

Sows giving birth and suckling their piglets are kept in farrowing crates which severely restrict their movements and behavioural freedom. Momentum for change to free (i.e., zero confinement) or flexible (i.e., temporary confinement) farrowing systems (Figure 1.) is growing, with voluntary or legal bans coming in across EU countries, and a major debate in the UK pig industry.

SRUC's Animal Behaviour and Welfare team have a 40-year history of working in this area including fundamental and applied research, that has been translated into commercial practice. Some key findings are shown in Figure 2.

Stakeholder engagement is a priority involving discussions on regulations and policy with NGOs and industry including QMS, AHDB and NPA, attending roundtables hosted by CIWF and SG, advising farmers and policy makers (EU, SG, Defra) and demonstrating SRUC's free farrowing system ('PigSAFE').

Our recent collaborative work has distilled the research and experiential evidence into a policy and practice review providing recommendations on 'sticking points' (e.g., space) that threaten to slow progress towards banning permanent farrowing crates (Baxter et al. 2025).

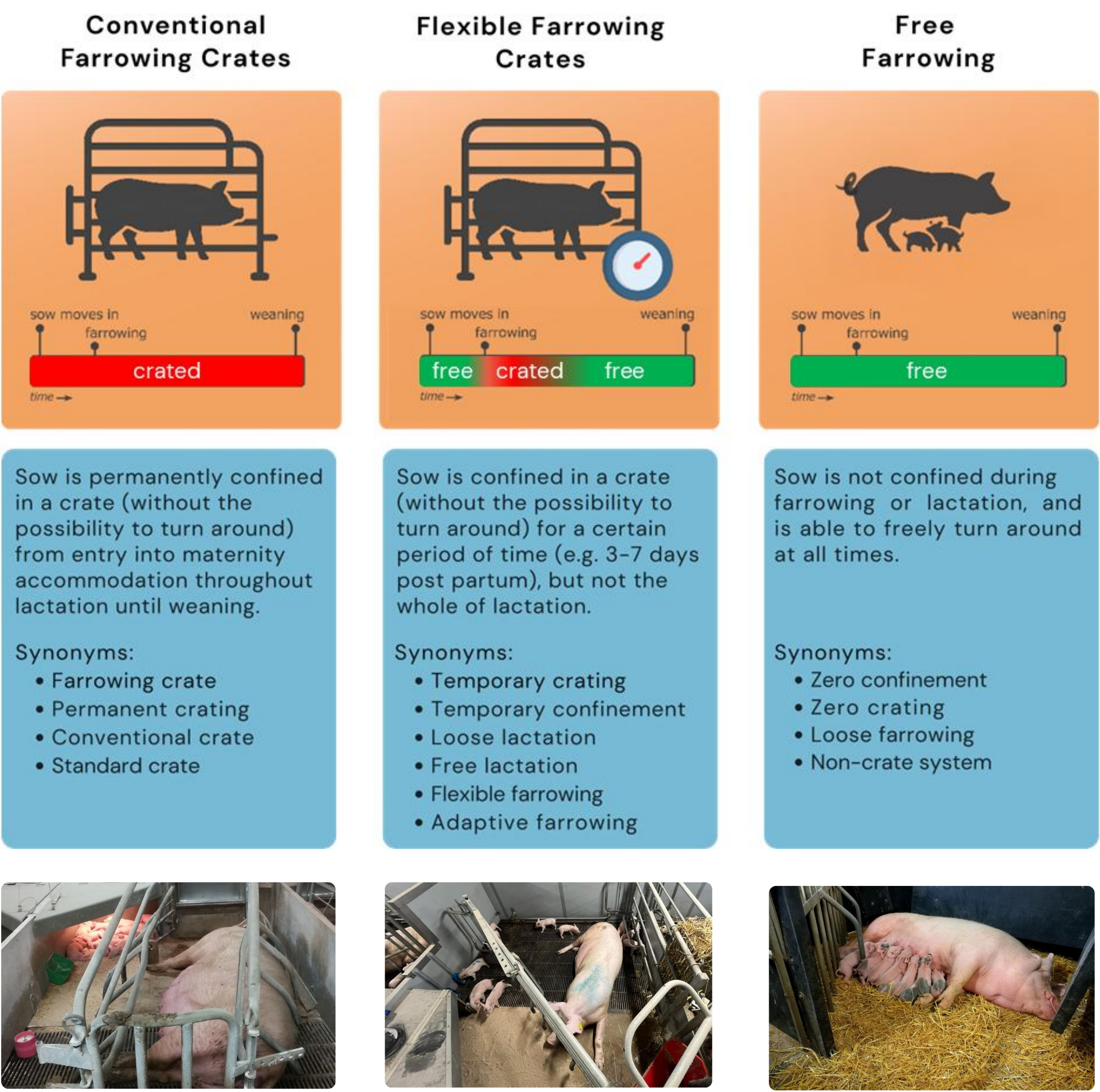


Figure 1. Infographic explaining the different terminology used to describe maternity (farrowing) systems for sows. Graphic adapted from collaborative work with Teagasc.

## Science into Practice – 40 years of research and knowledge exchange

### KEY FINDINGS

- Domestic sows still display important species-specific behaviours such as nest-building
- Crates cause a negative welfare state
- Sows in farrowing crates experience greater stress than loose-housed sows as crates thwart nest-building behaviour
- Piglet survival can be improved in loose-housed systems through breeding and management
- High welfare systems (e.g., PigSAFE) have been designed to meet the 'triangle of needs' between the sow, piglets and farmer

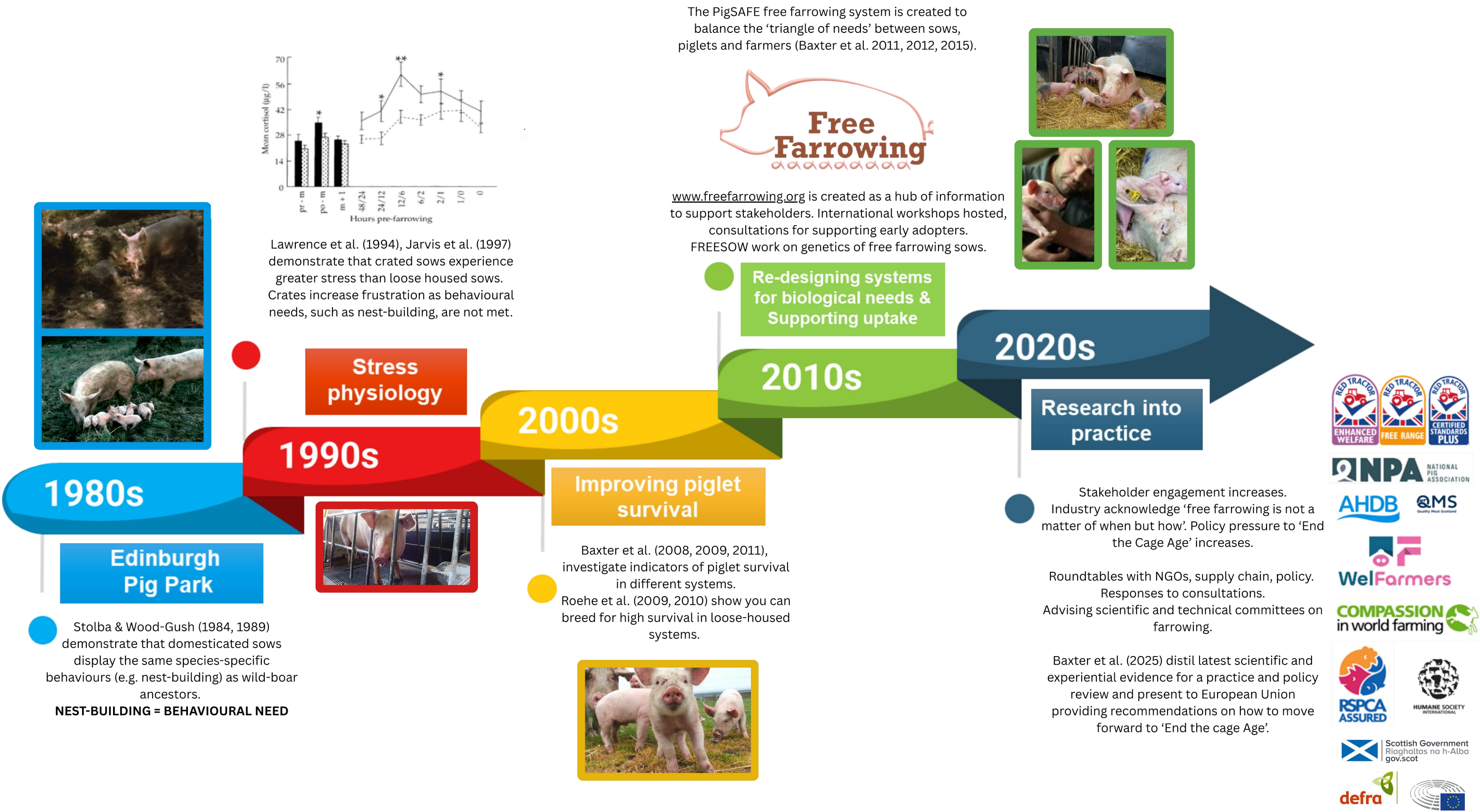


Figure 2. Infographic highlighting key areas of SRUC's farrowing research and knowledge transfer and exchange activities over the last 40 years.

## Conclusions

Close confinement systems for farrowing and lactating sows are not sustainable.

SRUC's work has contributed to the substantial evidence base demonstrating the welfare impacts of restrictive systems and the benefits of higher welfare alternatives.

Working with various collaborators we have distilled the scientific and experiential evidence into a policy and practice review to further aid decision makers and advance the transition towards free farrowing.

## References

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