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



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## Introduction

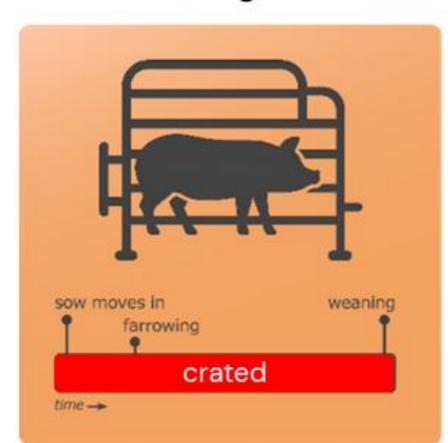
Sows giving birth and suckling their piglets are kept in farrowing crates which severely restrict their movements and behavioural freedom. Momentum for change to free (i.e., zero confinement) or flexible (i.e., temporary confinement) farrowing systems (Figure 1.) is growing, with voluntary or legal bans 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).

#### Conventional **Farrowing Crates**



Sow is permanently confined Sow is confined in a crate in a crate (without the (without the possibility to possibility to turn around) turn around) for a certain from entry into maternity period of time (e.g. 3-7 days post partum), but not the accommodation throughout whole of lactation. lactation until weaning.

#### Synonyms:

- Farrowing crate
- Permanent crating
- Conventional crate • Standard crate

#### Flexible Farrowing Crates



#### Synonyms:

- Temporary crating
- Temporary confinement Loose lactation
- Free lactation
- Flexible farrowing
- Adaptive farrowing

#### Free Farrowing



Sow is not confined during farrowing or lactation, and is able to freely turn around

#### Synonyms:

- Zero confinement
- Zero crating Loose farrowing
- Non-crate system





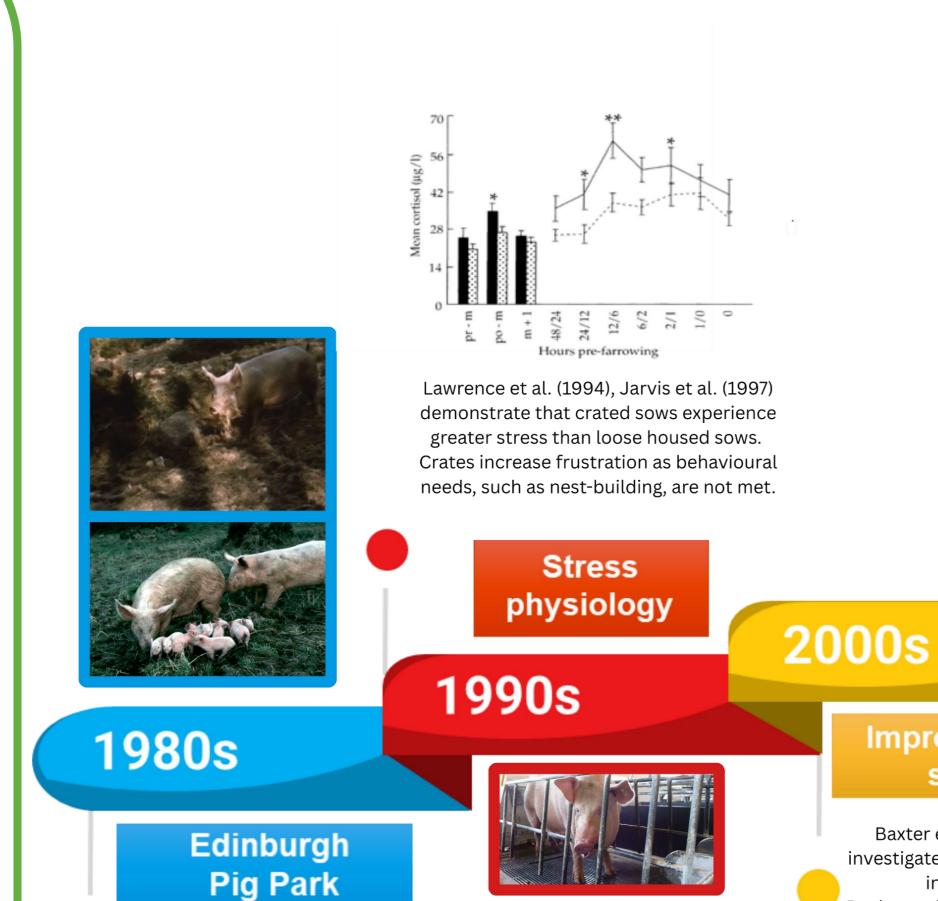




# Science into Practice – 40 years of research and knowledge exchange

### **KEY FINDINGS**

- Domestic sows still display important species-specific behaviours such as nestbuilding
- 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



piglets and farmers (Baxter et al. 2011, 2012, 2015). Free Farrowing www.freefarrowing.org is created as a hub of information to support stakeholders. International workshops hosted, consultations for supporting early adopters. FREESOW work on genetics of free farrowing sows Re-designing systems for biological needs & Supporting uptake 2010s

The PigSAFE free farrowing system is created to

balance the 'triangle of needs' between sows,

2020s Research into practice

> Stakeholder engagement increases. Industry acknowledge 'free farrowing is not a matter of when but how'. Policy pressure to 'End the Cage Age' increases.

Roundtables with NGOs, supply chain, policy. Responses to consultations. Advising scientific and technical committees on

Baxter et al. (2025) distil latest scientific and experiential evidence for a practice and policy review and present to European Union providing recommendations on how to move forward to 'End the cage Age'.











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

Stolba & Wood-Gush (1984, 1989)

emonstrate that domesticated sows

display the same species-specific

behaviours (e.g. nest-building) as wild-boar

**NEST-BUILDING = BEHAVIOURAL NEED** 

## 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

Improving piglet

survival

Baxter et al. (2008, 2009, 2011),

investigate indicators of piglet survival

in different systems.

Roehe et al. (2009, 2010) show you can

breed for high survival in loose-housed

systems.

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