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Starting Purchased Feeder Pigs

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

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pork industry handbook

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More than one-fourth of all market hogs in the United States were purchased as feeder pigs. While a majority of these pigs are fed in facilities relatively close to the purchase site, a large number are transported long distances for finishing.

Transporting and commingling practices expose young pigs to a variety of stresses. Feeder pigs may experience hunger, thirst and fatigue along with changes in diet, social order, pen mates and environment. In addition, commingled pigs often encounter disease organisms to which they have not developed resistance. Therefore, an effective purchasing and receiving program is recommended to minimize the ill effects of these stresses. The following are guidelines for purchasing and starting feeder pigs.

Type of Pig to Purchase

Feeder pigs are purchased from a variety of sources. Table 1 lists the percentage breakdown of pig sources for purchasers of feeder pigs.

Table 1. Sources of Feeder Pigs

Source	Region	
	North Central	Southeast
	-----%-----	
Direct from producer	52	28
Auction markets	36	57
Other	12	15

Van Arsdall and Nelson, 1984

Many problems can be avoided by careful purchase. The ideal group of feeder pigs:

1. originated from a single source,
2. have barrows castrated and healed,

3. are relatively free of internal and external parasites,
4. weighed at least 40 lb. at 8 weeks of age,
5. have tails docked.

Purchase the lightest weight pig that your facilities will accommodate (preferably greater than 50 lb. if transported an extended distance). Historically, the cost of weight gain in a finishing facility is less than the cost of that same weight purchased as a heavier feeder pig. The average feeder pig purchased in the United States has a 48-50 lb. payweight.

Management and Housing

The newly arrived pig, especially if it was transported any distance or held off feed and water for a time period, will have a lower arrival weight than payweight. Thus, management at arrival must recognize that shrink (weight loss from payweight to arrival weight) occurred and be targeted at minimizing the effects of this shrink.

The average shrink for feeder pigs purchased from auction markets and transported long distances (greater than 600 miles) has been 10-11% (4-5 lb.). For pigs purchased locally, it is not uncommon for the pigs to weigh 1-2 lb. less at arrival because of the stress and shrink associated with loading, unloading and transport.

Be prepared for the arriving pigs. Prior to the pigs' arrival, thoroughly clean and disinfect the facility. Upon arrival, especially in cold weather, provide a dry, draft-free sleeping area. In cold weather, supplemental heat and/or hovers and/or bedding may be necessary. For non-bedded inside facilities, provide 3-4 sq. ft. of floor area for 30-60 lb. pigs. For facilities using straw bedding and outside lots, provide 3-4 sq. ft. of sleeping space up to an average weight of 100 lb. and at least double this amount of space in the outside area.

Group pigs by size at arrival. Limit the weight range within a pen to plus or minus 10-15%, if possible. Put no more than 25-30 pigs per pen, especially inside pens. More than this may reduce performance due to excessive fighting and other aggressive actions.

One watering space is required per 10-15 pigs, especially if nipple or bite drinking devices are used. If nipple or bite watering devices are provided, they should have a delivery capacity of two or more cups of water per minute. It may be necessary to let these watering devices drip for a short time (2-6 hours) until the pigs learn to drink from them. Provide clean, palatable water.

Provide at least one feeder space for every 3-4 pigs. If the feeders have lids, it may be necessary to secure them in an open position until the pigs are eating properly. Floor feeding twice a day in the sleeping area on solid floors for the first few days promotes good dunging habits and allows the manager to more closely monitor feed intake. It also encourages more frequent observation of the pigs. Research has demonstrated that performance to market weight is not different for this management practice when compared to ad libitum feed offering upon arrival.

Nutrition

Formulate the diet for the newly arrived pigs based on the expected nutritional needs of the lightest 25% of the pigs. While the average payweight of a group of pigs may be 50 lb., if the bottom 25% average 30-35 lb. at arrival, a diet formulated for the 50 lb. pig will put these bottom pigs at a nutritional disadvantage. Increasing or decreasing the protein level for the first week following arrival generally does not improve performance.

The addition of 20% ground whole oats or 10% good quality alfalfa hay (not alfalfa meal) to the receiving diet for a 2-4 week period may aid in the reduction of the typical post-arrival scour. While this fiber addition will not adversely influence the rate of gain or feed efficiency from purchase to market, it has been shown to delay the onset of the typical post-arrival scour.

Research has not demonstrated any improvement in performance to market weight by the addition of vitamins and trace minerals at levels higher than those normally recommended for growing pig diets. In addition, there has been no consistent improved response from the addition of potassium chloride to the receiving diet.

The use of an antimicrobial feed additive in the receiving diet is recommended. The feed additive selected, and level of usage, depends on the individual farm situation, source of feeder pigs and additive availability. Seek professional help in selecting this additive, especially if it is added for control or eradication of a disease causing organism.

Regulations concerning additives and approved levels change often. **ALWAYS READ AND FOLLOW LABEL DIRECTIONS.** Refer to PIH-31, "Feed Additives for Swine" for further information.

After the 2 to 4 week receiving period, pigs may be switched to a balanced grower diet. Suggested diets are given in PIH-23, "Swine Diets."

Health

The major health problems affecting newly arrived feeder pigs are respiratory distress (pneumonia) and diarrhea (scours). Even though post-arrival scours are common, serious respiratory and diarrhea-related health problems may not occur until 6-8 weeks post-arrival.

Expect death losses. Currently, records indicate that the average purchaser of feeder pigs loses 3-4% of the pigs purchased to a variety of health causes. Many producers target death losses at 1% of the number purchased, and then they aggressively pursue treatment options when death loss is higher than 1.5%.

All-in/all-out management is strongly recommended. Do not put newly arrived pigs in a facility which contains pigs from a previous purchase. Never put purchased feeder pigs in the same

facility or on the same building site as home-raised finishing pigs.

FREQUENT OBSERVATION IS ESSENTIAL. Close scrutiny at least twice a day for the first few weeks and daily thereafter may prevent a serious disease outbreak. Monitor feed and water consumption, as reduced consumption of either is a sign of a problem. Provide a separate pen for sick animals. It may also be beneficial to provide zone heat in this pen to help the sick animal overcome the stress of illness.

Be prepared to act immediately in the event of illness. Have personnel trained to recognize the symptoms of major growing-finishing diseases and the most appropriate action to take in the event symptoms appear. Do not hesitate to consult with a veterinarian if in doubt as to the appropriate treatment. Have necropsies done on dead pigs to accurately determine the cause of death and the most effective treatment.

The routine addition of a medication (antibiotic or other product) to the drinking water for prevention of a health problem is not recommended. The addition of an electrolyte product to the drinking water at arrival has not been shown to consistently improve performance or health to market weight. However, have a water medication system available in the event water medication is prescribed for the control or treatment of a specific health problem.

Water medication equipment which allows measurement of consumption is preferred. Depending on weather conditions, a 40 lb. pig will consume nearly 1/2 gal. of water per day, with higher consumption and waste in warm weather. If average consumption is much less than this when water medicating, other avenues of medication should be pursued.

If palatability of the water medication is limiting intake, a flavoring agent such as corn syrup or flavored gelatin may increase consumption. Refrain from use of citrus flavored gelatin as a flavoring agent since its use may result in decreased intake due to palatability.

Avoid combining drugs or formulations unless approved on the label or prescribed by a veterinarian. Many combinations are incompatible in solution and the effectiveness of the combined drugs may be reduced. **ALWAYS READ AND FOLLOW ALL MEDICATION LABEL DIRECTIONS AND CAUTIONS,** even if you have previously used the medication. **BE AWARE OF ANY WITHDRAWAL WARNINGS PRIOR TO SALE FOR SLAUGHTER.**

The routine injection of feeder pigs with a long acting antibiotic formulation, either prior to transport or at arrival, has not been demonstrated to prevent or reduce subsequent health problems or to improve performance to market. However, in a disease outbreak, individual animals may require injections of appropriate antibiotics. Unless special long-acting formulations of drug products are used, these injections need to be continued for a minimum of three days.

Treat pigs for both internal and external parasites. Treat the pigs for worms shortly after arrival with a broad spectrum anthelmintic if the species of worms is unknown. Plan on treating again in 3-6 weeks to prevent reinfestation from shed eggs or larva. Use an anthelmintic that has proven activity against whip worms at one of these two wormings. Treat for lice and mange with an approved product shortly after arrival. Refer to PIH-40 "External Parasite Control on Swine" and PIH-44 "Internal Parasites" for specific recommendations.

If the feeder pigs are purchased from unknown sources, assume the worst in terms of health. The newly arrived pigs may be carriers of swine dysentery, pseudorabies, salmonella, actinobacillus pleuropneumonia, TGE or other contagious diseases. (Refer to other PIH fact sheets on these specific diseases on how to prevent their introduction into a facility).

Because of potential disease risks to swine already on the premises, isolation of the purchased pigs, either in separate lots or facilities, is recommended for at least 30 days. There is a definite financial risk to producers who purchase feeder pigs and house these pigs adjacent to breeding stock because of the increased health risks.