

MONITORING ORGANIC PIG FARMS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Introduction

The rapid increase in organic pig farming in Europe results in a need for information, especially on systems according to the new European organic regulations (table 1). Major changes are the larger required pen surface and the need for weaners and lactating sows for outside area.

Table 1. European housing regulations for organic pigs

category	indoor	outdoor
sows	2.5 m ²	1.9 m ²
lactating sows	7.5 m ²	2.5 m ²
piglets (<30kg)	0.6 m ²	0.4 m ²
finishers (<110kg)	1.3 m ²	1.0 m ²

Research is planned on specific organic research farms, such as in Raalte (NL), but at this stage information can be derived from variation on commercial organic pig farms. Ten pig farms were visited during the summer of 1999 and the winter of 1999/2000. A wide variety of data was collected.

Farm description

Organic pig farms have some land (2 to 80 ha) in contrast with traditional pig farms. The majority (80%) has as well breeding as finishing on the same farm where the traditional farm is more specialised. The average number of sows is 50 ranging from 20 to 100. The average number of finishing pigs is 255, ranging from 130 to 505. The animals are mainly housed in converted traditional buildings with less space than in table 1.

Technical performance

The performance of the farms was calculated on the basis of 1999. The results are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Technical performance of breeding and finishing on 10 Dutch organic pig farms

	average	range
litter index (litters/sow/y)	1.97	1.79 - 2.16
weaned piglets (piglets/sow/y)	18.3	16.8 - 20.8
preweaning mortality (% liveborn)	16.5	14.9 - 21.1
daily gain 25-110kg (n=2) (g/d)	749	725 - 772



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Health and well being

The general health status on the farms was satisfactory. However two aspects need extra attention in future research: lung problems caused by poor climate control and parasitic infection levels caused by pasture for the sows combined with absence of preventive measures. Abnormal behaviours like oral stereotypies, tail biting and vulva biting were rare on the visited farms.



Photo 1: Sows wallowing, rooting and grazing in pasture

Labour

The farmer with 100 sows and 505 finishing pigs spent 9 h per day on the farm. The others spent less time on their smaller pig branch and more time on other activities on their mixed farm. With the current knowledge the estimation is that organic family pig farm can be around 60% of the size of a traditional pig farm. The organic pig farmers qualify their working conditions as positive except for the dust levels.

Economics

The high cost price of organic pig meat is caused by a higher feed price, housing costs, lower performance and more labour. The benefits come from the higher (fixed) meat price of 2.05 Euro/kg. This price will hardly cover the costs.



Photo 2: "Fibre" is an important characteristic

Conclusions

The present generation of organic pig farmers run their farm according to the old organic regulations. Most of them found solutions for their own specific problems. A new generation of starting farms under new EU-regulations will face other questions. They have to learn from practical experience of the first generation and from research results. Research is focussing on farrowing accommodation, health control, environment, climate control, housing and labour.



Photo 3: Research on farrowing accommodation started