

For centuries, surgical castration has been performed on pig farms across Europe. Until recently, the procedure was performed without the use of anaesthesia or analgesia.

# Progress Report: Castration of Pigs in the EU

But now, the EU has proposed an outright ban on surgical castration, effective 1 January, 2018. While some member states have taken great steps in the right direction, progress in other countries has been slow or non-existent, writes Melanie Epp for The Pig Site

According to Compassion in World Farming, around 90 million piglets are castrated in the EU each year. The procedure is performed for a number of reasons, including to control aggressive and sexual behavior, and to prevent 'boar taint.' Castration has implications for the individual animals, though, including pain, stress and increased risk of infection.

There are alternatives, however. One alternative is immunocastration, a non-hormone vaccination widely used in Brazil, Belgium and Australia.

Although some see it as a hormone, it is not, since its active ingredient is an antibody that delays puberty in the boar until after the time of slaughter.

Uptake of immunocastration has also been incredibly slow as farmers are worried that consumers and retailers will not accept their meat. It is hoped that education will help to change these attitudes in the near future.

The other alternative is the production of entire males, which with proper management has been shown to be a viable alternative. Concerns about loss of export markets, however, still have some producers worried.

Dutch farmer Annechien Ten Have-Mellema has been producing entire males since 1995. She says that she will never go back to castration. "You have to accept that boars move more, jump or play more," she said. "It is different, but we experienced no problems."

For Ms Ten Have-Mellema, immunocastration is not a solution. "You are still doing an intervention on the pig," she said. "You have to vaccinate twice. It costs more money. Maybe for special products you could use immunocastration, but not for the mainstream pig production."

With that said, Ms Ten Have-Mellema does understand that you cannot raise entire males if the market is not there. "We have to work market driven. If there is a market for meat of entire males, you can stop castration. You cannot stop if there is no market."

French pig producer Mickaël Benoit stopped castrating his pigs three years ago. Mr Benoit, who rais-

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A close-up photograph of a pig's face, focusing on its large, pink, textured snout and its eyes. The pig has light-colored, slightly messy hair. The background is dark and out of focus.

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es 400 sows that produce some 10,000 pigs per year, said the switch was very easy.

Not only does he think non-castration is safer, but he also thinks it's better for the health of his pigs – both sows and piglets. Mr Benoit exports to China through Cooperl Arc Atlantique, and has had no problems with the market as a result of the switch. “We kept the same customers,” said Mr Benoit. “For them, it's a good thing because they can sell pigs from higher welfare standards.”

But not all pork producers can find a market for entire boars. Paul Wouters, a Dutch farmer from Bladel in the Netherlands, for example, would like to stop castrating his pigs, but he cannot because the local market is already saturated. Mr Wouters raises 350 sows and 2,500 porkers.

“We produce what the market requires,” he explained. “At this moment there are still markets which require meat from castrated male pigs. We would rather like to stop this method if the market accepts meat from non-castrated pigs.”

Mr Wouters sees the risk of boar taint a hindrance as well. “The quality of meat needs to improve because the meat can have boar taint,” he said. “The pig industry is working hard to reduce boar taint and to find solutions for early detection. We do, however, find that the market must be leading in this case.”

### Progress Report on Castration

The expert group on ending the surgical castration of pigs, Steering Committee Boars 2018, recently provided a progress report for the European Commission. According to one of the group's experts, Gé Backus from Wageningen University in the Netherlands, progress has been steady.

“In several countries we have by now satisfactory multi-year experience with producing and marketing entire male pigs,” he said in an interview. “And we can also observe that especially in Germany the

issue is really on the agenda.”

“This is due to the German ban on castration without using anaesthesia, coming into effect January 2019,” he continued. “Several retailers have announced that they will accept meat from entire male pigs. This is very crucial, given the importance of the German pork meat market for the whole European pig industry.”

The report, which shows progress between 2012 and 2014, provided detailed information on individual countries. Some countries, like the UK and Ireland, have a long history of producing entire males. In fact, in the aforementioned countries, castration is not performed at all. Some, like the Netherlands

and Belgium, have recently started to produce entire males. By the end of 2014, approximately 65 per cent of male pigs were raised as entire boars. That number is up from just 5 per cent in 2009, according to the report.

In Belgium, similar to the Netherlands and Germany, the export market is more important than the domestic market, which can affect the number of pigs raised as whole hogs. However, according to the report, meat from both entire males and immunocastrated pigs is sold domestically.

In Denmark, pigs are castrated using prolonged analgesia, as is law there. Only about 5 per cent of pigs are raised as whole hogs. According to the report, they do not consider immunocastration as a solution, most likely for fear of losing export market sales.

The Danish believe that an EU-wide solution is necessary before further progress can be made

In France, 95 per cent of producers are part of VPF, the French pork meat scheme, which requires the use of prolonged analgesia. According to the Commission's report, the largest French pork products group, Cooperl Arc Atlantique, announced that it would stop castration as of March 2013. However, as of 2014, only 70 per cent of the pig meat it accepted came from non-castrated males.

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All male piglets are castrated in Finland, some using anaesthesia and/or analgesia, some not. In Austria, however, prolonged analgesia is compulsory by law.

Switzerland has banned castration since 2010.

In Sweden, it is compulsory to use general anaesthesia. The percentage of entire boars raised in Sweden, according to the report, is no more than 1-2 per cent. "Farmers consider boar management as a problem in relation to aggressive behavior," Mr Backus wrote.

According to the most recent statistics (2014), 5-10 per cent of male pigs are not castrated in Germany. Despite the fact that the three main processors, which represent 55 per cent of production, accept entire boars, retailers demand guarantees for the absence of boar tainted meat.

In Spain and Portugal, 80 per cent of males are produced whole. Of the 20 per cent that are castrated, 5-8 per cent are Iberico pigs. Iberico pigs are raised for the production of Iberico ham, a product with Protected Designation Origin (PDO) status. According to the report, non-castration is not an option since Iberico pigs are raised heavy. While no analgesia is given, apparently some Iberico producers do see it as an alternative.

In some countries, such as Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Hungary, almost no progress has been made at all. According to the Commission's report, high carcass weight is one obstacle. The other is market acceptance. Anaesthesia and/or analgesia are not used.

In Italy, pigs are castrated, some using pain medi-

cation, some without. It should be noted that most pork produced in Italy is for Parma ham, which also has a PDO designation. The Italian industry does not consider the production of entire males as a viable option.

Sanne van Zanen, who recently completed her master's degree in Animal Science at Wageningen University in the Netherlands, presented her thesis on the status of non-castration in Europe. Specifically, she looked at which European countries have the potential to join the four frontrunners – the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Sweden – when it comes to a move towards non-castration.

Ms Van Zanen's thesis concluded that the UK and Ireland are well on their way. "They barely castrate at all," she said in an interview. "Animal welfare is of high importance to them. About 100 per cent are raised as entire boars."

Belgium has also made a lot of progress. While the majority is still castrated, of all European states, they have embraced immunocastration the most.

According to Ms van Zanen's study, which concurs with the Commission's report, the countries in Eastern Europe have made the least amount of progress. There, she said, animal welfare is of low importance, and there is a lack of knowledge on alternatives.

Ms Ten Have-Mellema agrees that this is a big problem, not only in Eastern Europe, but in all member states. "There are a lot of rumours about non-castration," she said. "Not always the right story is told, so it is very important to exchange information, knowledge and experiences. Not only between researchers but also between farmers."