

Managing Pig Feed Costs In Niche Pork Production

The rising price of corn has created increased interest in alternative feedstuffs by livestock producers, and niche market pork producers are no exception. Unfortunately, there is currently no single replacement for corn in Midwest pig diets, even at today's market prices. Thus, managing factors that you can more easily control is critical for continued success in pork production.

Here are eight practical strategies for managing feed costs.

1. Environmental conditions

Pig performance is affected by the environment the animal faces. Sick pigs do not perform as well as healthy pigs, thus maintaining pig health is critical.

- ◆ Minimize drafts and provide plenty of bedding.
- ◆ Clean and disinfect regularly; allow time between groups of pigs.
- ◆ Supply adequate, clean drinking water.
- ◆ Practice segregation and batch rearing.
- ◆ Avoid overstocking - it can lead to stress.

2. Feeder adjustment

Up to 10% feed waste is almost undetectable in a production setting. Set feeders so that daily opening is needed for feed to flow freely.

- ◆ Open feeder just enough to start feed flow.
- ◆ Use rod or hand to pull feed into pan.
- ◆ Cover 1/3, and ONLY 1/3, of feeding pan with feed.
- ◆ Check and adjust feeders twice daily.
- ◆ Pigs prefer fresh feed; stale feed leads to waste.

3. Limit feeding

Limit fed pigs have improved feed efficiency (feed/gain), although this practice may be difficult to handle with large groups.

- ◆ Limit feeding requires feeding several times daily.
- ◆ Pig uniformity can decline.
- ◆ Growth rate can slow.

4. Feed particle size

Digestive enzymes work on the surface area of particles.

- ◆ Medium grind: 700 microns is the target.
- ◆ 700 microns \approx 0.03 inches (1/4 inch hammer mill)
- ◆ <650 microns causes digestive upset and bridging in feeders.
- ◆ >750 microns is insufficient surface area for digestive enzymes to work optimally.
- ◆ Three sieve analysis of feed particle size is recommended.

See the following Web site for the procedure and list of equipment:

- ◆ www.asi.ksu.edu/DesktopModules/ViewDocument.aspx?DocumentID=2771

5. Matching diets with pigs

The size of the pig affects its nutritional need. Large variation in pig size within a pen can lead to small pigs being underfed and big pigs being overfed.

- ◆ Growing pigs: Critical measure of feed is cost/pound of gain or feed cost/pig sold.
- ◆ Sow feeding: Gestation sows should be limit fed.
- ◆ Overfeeding sows increases feed costs, lowers conception rates, increases piglet mortality, and increases risk to herdsman and equipment.
- ◆ Feeding low energy, high bulk diets is appropriate for gestating sows.
- ◆ Individual feeding stalls allow animal specific management within sow groups.

6. Strategic culling

Older sows provide some immunity benefits, and replacement gilt costs are high. Managing and selecting for sow longevity is beneficial.

- ◆ A 12 pigs/year sow eats almost as much as a 20 pigs/year sow.
- ◆ Batch farrowing critical for niche producers.
- ◆ Consider whether you can afford to keep sub-par maternal animals that fail to breed on time.
- ◆ Eliminate chronically sick pigs to avoid further infection of the herd.

7. Marketing decisions

Larger animals require more feed for each pound of additional gain, thus a historic strategy for managing increased feed costs is to market lighter animals.

- ◆ Feed to the lower boundary of market weight range.
- ◆ With expensive feed, there's a larger penalty for overshooting target market weight.

8. Homegrown feed

This may offer benefits to the entire farming operation. Growing feedstuffs is a common cost control strategy for Midwest pig farms.

- ◆ Alternative feedstuffs in rotation may enhance soil fertility and pest management options.
- ◆ Alternatives such as small grains provide a valuable source of high quality bedding.
- ◆ Consider all costs and benefits, including quality assurance of homegrown feed when compared with feed purchased from distant sources.
- ◆ Homegrown feeds may result in greater economics for the farming operation as a whole.

For more information on feed cost management strategies, contact your Iowa State University Extension swine field specialist or Iowa Pork Industry Center.

