

NPA BRIEFING



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NPA briefing note on large-scale pig farms

Issue:

There is ongoing debate surrounding large-scale farming systems and their effect on animal health and welfare, the environment and UK food production.

Background:

- Organisations such as Soil Association, Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), Farms Not Factories and World Animal Protection strongly oppose and actively campaign against what they term 'mega', 'super' or 'factory' farms.
- There is no clear definition of what is meant by a 'factory' farm. Campaigns against factory farms often tangle up the issue of size/scale with the matter of farming system (intensive versus extensive). They perceive that large-scale farms strive to achieve maximum output (e.g. of pork) with little regard for the individual animals.
- Concerns about large-scale animal farming include
 - **animal welfare**, on the grounds that large units typically involve animals being housed indoors in big groups where injuries of individual animals may go unnoticed;
 - **animal health**, because larger groups of animals could experience rapid spread of disease and maintain populations of bacteria with antibiotic resistance;
 - **economy**, under the pretence that large units will outcompete traditional small family farms and destroy rural communities;
 - **environment**, suggesting that large farms may strain soil and water resources, generate more pollution, look unsightly and emit foul smells.
- Notable examples of recent planning applications for large-scale farms in the UK include a 2,500 sow and pig rearing unit in Foston, Derbyshire ^[1] and a dairy for 1,000 cattle in Powys, Wales.
- The proposal for the Foston pig unit was put forward in 2011 by UK pig production company Midland Pig Producers ^[2]. They are seeking planning permission for a pig unit to house 2,500 breeding sows and their offspring (producing 1,000 pigs per week for sale) plus a biogas plant, on a 30 acre plot of land.
- The Foston proposal has been met with fierce opposition from a number of NGOs despite
 - plans for the unit to have three stages of **air filtration** to minimise the possibility of ammonia and associated strong-smelling gases escaping into the atmosphere;
 - plans for the site to have a biogas facility for the generation of **renewable electricity** and heat to supply the farm and the National Grid;
 - guarantees that the farm would be a high-health unit operating to **strict biosecurity practices** to minimise the risk of disease transmission;
 - results of an **Environmental Impact Assessment** concluding that the site would have no significant impact on the local environment;

- plans for the unit to be part of an independently audited **Quality Assurance scheme** with specific standards relating to animal welfare;
 - the proposed production systems (including the **360 free farrowing crate**) having been developed in conjunction with and endorsed by CIWF;
 - best practice for sow and piglet welfare being incorporated at every stage of the farm design;
 - promises to ensure employment opportunities and contracts will be offered to the **local area** wherever possible.
- The UK is only 40% self-sufficient for pork, and exports of UK pigmeat are increasing significantly with more than 200,000 tonnes currently being exported each year ^[3]. At these levels, there is plenty of scope for both large pig companies and small farms to find a market for their product.
 - The remaining 60% of pork consumed in the UK is imported from other EU and non-EU countries, where welfare standards cannot be guaranteed and product traceability is not always possible. Conversely, 92 % of pigs in the UK are produced on Red Tractor assured units, which are monitored for indicators of welfare under the [Real Welfare](#) scheme. The more British pork available on supermarket shelves, the more opportunity there is for the British public to choose a quality, farm-assured product with a short supply chain.
 - Currently, 40% of sows in the UK are kept outdoors. Even if indoor pig units become larger, a significant number of pigs will still be born outdoors. The ability of British consumers to choose where to buy their pork from and from what system, according to their personal preference or budget, will remain.
 - Indeed, while some may believe that outdoor pig production is more welfare-friendly, it cannot be ignored that housing pigs indoors protects them from extreme weather and reduces piglet mortality ^[4]. Both indoor and outdoor systems have their pros and cons – ultimately how the unit is managed by its staff will have the biggest impact on animal health and welfare.
 - A skilled workforce is vital for good husbandry on all pig units, regardless of size or system. The British pig industry is committed to providing training and continuous professional development to all workers, from stockpeople to unit managers and farm owners. BPEX offers a comprehensive program of skills training and the Pig Industry Professional Register is able to demonstrate the competence of the current dedicated workforce by recording the activity and progress of its members.
 - Pig units with more than 750 sows or housing more than 2,000 production pigs must apply for an environmental permit from the Environment Agency ^[5]. To be granted a permit, farmers must demonstrate how they meet the required criteria for minimising the risk of pollution to air, land and water. The permits cover all aspects of farm management, from feed delivery to manure management. The Environment Agency conducts inspections on farms to ensure they are compliant with their permit.
 - The general trend of the last two decades has been of declining numbers of pig farms with a steady increase in size ^[6]. This trend is a result of UK farming coming under pressure from
 - disease challenges,
 - increasing legislation,
 - retailer demand to produce food more cheaply and
 - increasing input costs (fuel, feed, electricity, straw).
 - These pressures mean that pig producers are frequently making a loss on their product, i.e. when cost of production outweighs the price they receive for their pork. The UK pig industry does not receive subsidy payments from Government and must therefore be competitive and progressive.

- Smaller farms can find it difficult to compete under these pressures. Whereas bigger farms tend to be more profitable (or less-loss making) due to economies of scale. Increased output means pig farmers can achieve lower cost of production per unit of pork ^[6].
- Efficient, profitable businesses are more likely to be able to afford better equipment, new fit for purpose housing and to employ more staff, including their own vets and nutritionists. With more staff and dedicated vets, larger scale farms can ensure that all pigs receive the same level of attention that they would receive on small farms.
- This model has been successful for the UK poultry industry, which has been operating large-scale intensive farms within integrated businesses for the past 50 years.
- Despite the steady increase in the size of UK pig farms, the average herd size (number of sows) across UK commercial farms is only around 350-400. This number is very small compared to the USA and mainland Europe, where many units have more than 10,000 sows ^[6].
- Furthermore, many of the larger 'factory farms' discredited by various NGO's are still family farms/businesses.

NPA position:

- Modern food production techniques are no longer akin to the rural idyll that was once farming in Britain. UK agriculture is a business and is committed to producing food for an ever-growing population in both the UK and around the world. Modern agricultural practices must develop and progress in order to be able to meet this demand for food and to minimise effects of market volatility.
- Animal welfare is extremely important to NPA farmers and, as such, efforts to increase efficiency will never be made at a cost to the welfare of their animals.
- NPA does not recognise the terms 'factory' or 'mega' farm, since there is no accepted definition of either.
- NPA believes that animal welfare is not dictated solely by farm size or by the type of farming system. Rather, the management of the farm and treatment of the individual animal is ultimately responsible for ensuring good animal welfare standards. Indeed, as asserted by the RSPCA '*it is not the scale of production that, in itself, has an impact on animal welfare, but the conditions under which the animals are kept*'. ^[7]
- The legislation surrounding planning permission is complicated and inconsistent due to it being handled at a local level. NPA wants to see Government ensure that planning applications for pig units are handled in a timely, consistent manner and without undue prejudice against large-scale farms.
- Whilst NPA completely agrees that animal welfare is of utmost importance, it is not a planning consideration. As such, objections to planning proposals on the grounds of welfare should always be discounted.
- NPA encourages its members to create an open and honest line of communication with the local community when submitting planning proposals to identify and resolve any concerns.

References

^[1]http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/environment/planning/planning_applications/current_applications/search_current/app-details.asp?AppCode=CW9/0311/174&AppType=2&searchBy=foston

^[2]<http://www.mppfoston.com/>

^[3]<http://www.bpex.org.uk/prices-facts-figures/imports-exports/UKpigmeatexports.aspx>

^[4]<http://www.bpex.org.uk/prices-facts-figures/costings/KPIIndoorBreedingHerd.aspx>

^[5]https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/297084/geho0110brsb-e-e.pdf

^[6]<http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/POST-PN-404/livestock-super-farms>

^[7]<http://www.rspca.org.uk/ImageLocator/LocateAsset?asset=document&assetId=1232734680312&mode=prd>

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