

NPA BRIEFING



Date: 15th Dec 2014
Contact: Zoe Davies
Telephone: 07814 448956

NPA briefing note on tail docking

Issue:

The practice of tail docking in piglets is frequently used by animal welfare organisations as an example of poor animal welfare associated with intensive pig production.

Background:

- Tail-biting in domestic pigs occurs when pigs bite and chew the tails of pen-mates.
- There are a number of different reasons why growing pigs display this abnormal behaviour – it can result from one or a combination of environmental, nutritional or husbandry factors.
- Tail-biting occurs in different scenarios, ranging from a constant minor problem to explosive outbreaks in individual batches. Sporadic outbreaks can be very difficult to manage.
- Tail-biting has substantial welfare¹ and economic² implications. Tail injuries range from mild to severe and tail-bitten pigs are likely to be in pain and distress. The wounds are a site for further infection, which can result in reduced growth performance and carcass condemnation.
- Tail-docking, which usually limits the likelihood and severity of tail-biting is permitted following veterinary advice under EU Council Directive 2008/120/EC.
- Routine tail-docking is illegal. It may only be done where there is evidence of tail injuries and where other measures to prevent tail-biting have been tried.
- Only a veterinarian or somebody that has been trained and deemed competent in the procedure is permitted to carry out tail-docking.
- 92% of pigs produced in the UK are from units that are members of Red Tractor Farm Assurance, which stipulates additional requirements regarding tail-docking to protect piglet welfare.
- The pain caused by tail-docking is usually moderate and short-lived, but very little is known about any long-term pain following tail-docking³.
- A review⁴ of measures to control tail-biting without tail-docking identified the following:
 - Not enough is known about measures to prevent tail-biting.
 - Evidence of how different risk factors interact with one another and affect incidence of tail-biting is conflicting.
 - Methods of early detection of tail-biting outbreaks are not currently available.
 - Lack of research on how best to respond to tail-biting outbreaks.
 - Further research into the effectiveness of different types of environmental enrichment (toys and materials) is needed.
 - Research into alternative options to straw that can be used with slatted floors, such as ropes, is also necessary.

- A recent study of risk factors for tail-biting on 65 commercial pig units in England found no significant difference in risk scores between systems with and without straw⁵. This suggests that provision of straw is not a silver bullet for preventing tail-biting.

NPA position:

- In certain cases, growing pig welfare may be compromised more by leaving tails at full length than by tail-docking. NPA believes that the decision to tail-dock should remain with the unit manager and vet.
- Risk factors for tail-biting are complicated. Generalised recommendations for controlling this behaviour are not always appropriate on particular farms.
- The NPA agrees with the European Food Safety Authority's recommendation in a recent report⁶ that "there is a need for further studies to provide guidance on how to house and manage undocked pigs under different farm circumstances without uncontrollable tail-biting outbreaks".
- Considerably more research is needed on tail-biting, tail-docking and environmental enrichment, under commercial pig production settings, as listed above.
- The UK pig industry is committed to finding a solution tail-docking. However, until these knowledge gaps have been closed, the NPA will oppose a total ban on tail-docking, because the practice should be available for use where circumstances dictate.

References

¹ Munsterhjelm, C., Brunberg, E., Heinonen, M., Keeling, L., Valros, A. Stress measures in tail biters and bitten pigs in a matched case-control study (2013) *Animal Welfare*, 22 (3), pp. 331-338.

² <http://www.nadis.org.uk/bulletins/tail-biting.aspx>

³ Scientific Opinion of the Panel on Animal Health and Welfare on a request from Commission on the risks associated with tail biting in pigs and possible means to reduce the need for tail docking considering the different housing and husbandry systems. *The EFSA Journal* (2007) 611, 1-13

⁴ D'Eath, R.B., Arnott, G., Turner, S.P., Jensen, T., Lahrmann, H.P., Busch, M.E., Niemi, J.K., Lawrence, A.B., Sandøe, P. Injurious tail biting in pigs: How can it be controlled in existing systems without tail docking? (2014) *Animal*, 8 (9), pp. 1479-1497.

⁵ Taylor, N.R., Parker, R.M.A., Mendl, M., Edwards, S.A., Main, D.C.J. Prevalence of risk factors for tail biting on commercial farms and intervention strategies (2012) *Veterinary Journal*, 194 (1), pp. 77-83

⁶ EFSA AHAW Panel (EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Welfare), 2014. Scientific Opinion concerning a multifactorial approach on the use of animal and non-animal-based measures to assess the welfare of pigs. *EFSA Journal* 2014;12(5):3702, 101 pp.

END