

Can the pork industry end castration across Europe by 2018?

Imagine an issue that affects all EU countries, but some more than others. An issue driven by consumer demand and with potentially significant financial impact. An issue which the European Commission (EC) has not legislated for, preferring rather to let the industry find its own solution voluntarily. No, it's not the Euro – it's pig castration.

By 2018 stakeholders in the pork industry have agreed to find a way to end piglet castration across the Union, in accordance with the 2010 EU Declaration which called for a voluntary end to the practice.

The good news is that there is a general agreement among stakeholders of the need to end castration in its present form on welfare grounds. Right along the supply chain there is an acceptance that European consumers are increasingly aware of the way in which their food is produced, and are looking to buy meat that is produced in a more animal-friendly and sustainable way. The question is: can such a diverse group, with so many different interests, agree the most appropriate ways to replace this age-old method of production?

Entering into a debate

Head of the animal welfare unit at the European Commission, Andrea Gavinelli, admits that the 2010 Declaration is something of an experiment for the Commission.

"This is a first for the EU. In the past we have always legislated to address animal welfare issues. This time instead of responding with legislation, we are seeing if voluntary, group action can come up with the answer. We are entering into a debate, whereas before there would have been legislation.

"Animal welfare has a high profile for EU citizens. The question is how far a market-driven approach is able to satisfy the welfare needs of the EU.

"We will look outside Europe to see how they have solved the problem in other markets. The most important task is to work for the internal market: we want to avoid any barriers in the internal market."

Mr Gavinelli addressed a recent meeting that was set-up to discuss possible solutions



to the castration issue in Europe. Boars Heading to 2018 brought together a collection of academics, researchers, and members of the pork supply chain from across Europe, in response to an initiative by Wageningen University in the Netherlands.

Dr Gé Backus, who is coordinating the five year Dutch research project to stop castration, highlighted the challenges facing the industry across Europe. He explained that countries differ widely in their sense of urgency to address the issue, and there is an uneven distribution of risks and benefits across the chain. For example, in the Netherlands 40% of pigs are no longer castrated and the media interest in the issue has started to wane. In contrast, in Germany, France and Italy, interest is increasing.

"Each country has its own clock speed. Learning from each other is crucial to the Declaration of Brussels," he told the meeting.

Lack of agreement

The differences across Europe were further highlighted by Dr Michel Courat from the welfare NGO Eurogroup for Animals, who pointed out that French and Spanish producers had yet to pledge their support for the Declaration. He also commented on the lack of retailer, food service industry and consumer representatives at the meeting.

"The fact that this is a voluntary commitment makes us wonder if it is a good or bad idea.

"A critical success factor is for all stakeholders to be on board and play the game. At the moment I get the feeling some are hiding behind the door."

Dr Courat also suggested that the approach to finding a solution had not been as open-minded as it could be. For example, immunocastration – the use of a vaccine to temporarily suppress testicular function and thus boar taint levels – had been deliberately sidelined. There were a number of myths being perpetuated about this particular alternative, he said.

"All these reasons are making the discussion a bit curious because there is no objective assessment of immunocastration. We don't say this is a good definitive method – but we say that it is an immediately usable temporary method to stop surgical castration."

In Belgium a number of major retailers are now selling meat only from boars raised using the anti-taint vaccine, he said, but these retailers were not present at the meeting to share their experiences.

Marcello Marchesi, general manager of the pig division of the Martini Group in Italy, said that immunocastration provided an advantage of about €7 per pig compared to castration, as a result of better growth efficiency. However, the increased trimming required to remove residual testicles meant that this option was not suitable for Parma hams.

"Immunocastration will improve productivity, I have no doubt about that. It will be a possible solution for non-Parma areas of Italy. But for our specific (heavy) pigs, my suggestion is that we need a specific exemption (from the castration ban)."

Heavy pig production certainly presents its own, unique problems. Raising intact boars to an average liveweight of 160kg is currently not a feasible option, he said.

However, Dr Courat was adamant that Eurogroup for Animals would not accept any exemptions from the end to castration.

Preventing boar taint from reaching the consumer underpins all efforts to finding an alternative to castration. Feeding special

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diets has been suggested, but so far no cheap, effective nutritional additives have been identified.

Many seem to be pinning their hopes on breeding 'low taint' pigs, but undesirable effects on fertility are a concern and the consensus seems to be that this approach will take at least 10-15 years.

Even if a male pig with an inherently low taint risk could be achieved by breeding or improved husbandry, then the general feeling was that a safety net would still be required on the slaughter line to detect those few carcasses that still had unacceptable levels of taint – begging the question: would the investment be worthwhile?

With no definitive list of exactly which compounds should be tested for, and no standardised agreement on what levels of boar taint compounds are acceptable or not acceptable, the development of a commercially practical test on the line is still some way off.

The prevalence of taint carcasses at the slaughter house does not appear to be entirely clear and was highlighted as an area where more information was required.

Dr Ma. Angels Oliver, from Spanish research group IRTA, pointed out that research on taint has been carried out for decades but with no standardisation of methodology.

As a result, the level of tainted carcasses

varies widely between studies, from over 50% to less than a few percent.

Mr Hubert Kelliger, head of sales for Westfleisch, Germany, said that his company had found about 3% of carcasses from entire males to be tainted.

With some 30 million pigs in Germany, that means that an outlet would have to found for around 800 tonnes of tainted meat per week.

Today, the vast majority (98%) of Westfleisch customers do not accept meat from entire males.

As castration has been the industry standard for so long, nobody really knows just how big a problem taint would be in Europe if castration was replaced by raising entire boars. What we do know for sure, is that the behavioural issues associated with entire boars have a potentially negative impact on welfare.

Finding a European solution

Mr Gavinelli said that the EU had agreed to support the European partnership on pig castration to the tune of €1.33 million, although he admitted it was a 'very small amount: less than we spent in Italy to eradicate TB'.

He outlined six areas where this money will be spent over the next two years with a view to finding a European solution to the

issue. Research projects will include consumer acceptance, rapid taint detection methods, economic analysis, methods for taint reduction (breeding, feeding, husbandry), and development of a dedicated website.

There will then be three years in which to work out a 'concrete policy'.

Mr Gavinelli also mentioned an EU animal welfare strategy document, which has been recently published, that suggests a Future of Pig Castration planning workshop to be held in September, possibly in Brussels.

The castration challenge is undoubtedly a daunting one. The problem itself is not yet fully defined, let alone a solution agreed.

In fact, the chances of a finding a single solution that will suit all stakeholders, in all parts of Europe, are slim; and perhaps pushing for just one, universal solution is not the best strategy.

At this stage, it seems that keeping an open mind is a more realistic and potentially fruitful approach. It would be rash to discount any solution that shows potential – even if it is not an ideal answer long term.

Ultimately, it may be that commercial need may make the decision in many markets. 2018 may seem a long way off now, but the clock is ticking: if the self-regulation experiment does not produce results then perhaps the Commission will ultimately have to step in and legislate against castration after all. ■