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Contact: Brittany Morstatter

ARPAS@assochq.org

Behavior modification of nursery piglets through exposure to a loading ramp

A new study in *Applied Animal Science* investigates behavior and loading speed at marketing of hogs whose nursery pen included a ramp

Philadelphia, PA, August 17, 2020—When hogs are marketed, they are exposed to numerous stressors and face unfamiliar environments and objects, which can lead to stress, injury, or death during marketing and trailer transport. This can negatively affect animal welfare and pork quality. A recent [article](#) in *Applied Animal Science* explored one possible solution: decreasing the novelty of loading for transport. This research characterized the effects of keeping piglets in nursery housing with a loading ramp where feed was offered only at the top of the ramp versus “flat” nursery housing with no ramp.

The researchers wanted to discover whether hogs introduced to a loading ramp during the nursery period would have increased efficiency of loading during marketing and whether growth and behavior would be affected. They constructed a standard nursery pen and another pen that included a ramp within the pen, which was elevated a bit each day until it reached a 20-degree angle. The only food source in the second pen was located at the top of the ramp. The scientists observed the pigs for 35 days in these pens and later as market-weight hogs.

The researchers found that average daily gain was not different between pigs reared with or without a ramp. “Interestingly, at the end of the nursery period and at four and five months of age, even though pigs with the ramp consumed less feed, their body weights and average daily gains were the same as pigs that did not have a ramp to access feed,” said David K. Beede, PhD, editor in chief of *Applied Animal Science*. The researchers also found that pigs in the pen with a ramp had fewer aggressive interactions with pen mates. Their most practical finding came when it was time for market loading. “Pigs housed in conventional nursery pens took almost twice as long to ascend the loading ramp at marketing compared with pigs from nursery pens with ramps,” said lead investigator Sarah A. Wagner, DVM, PhD, School of Veterinary Medicine at Texas Tech University, Amarillo, TX, USA.

The researchers did not observe any negative effects of the inclusion of a ramp in the nursery pen. It appeared that pigs learned to use the ramp and were rewarded for their efforts with access to feed. Wagner commented, “adding ramps to nursery pig housing is a simple way to speed loading of market hogs, while providing benefits to efficiency and behavior in the nursery.”

The article appears in the August issue of *Applied Animal Science*.

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Notes for Editors

“A ramp in nursery housing affects nursery pig behavior and speeds loading of market hogs,” by B. L. Novak, J. M. Young, D. J. Newman, A. K. Johnson, and S. A. Wagner (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15232/aas.2019-01974>), *Applied Animal Science*, Volume 36, Issue 4 (August 2020), published by FASS Inc. and Elsevier Inc.

Full text of the article is available to credentialed journalists upon request; contact Brittany Morstatter at +1-217-356-3182 ext. 143 or arpas@assoqhq.org to obtain copies. To schedule an interview with the authors, please contact Dr. Sarah A. Wagner at DairyPharmND@gmail.com.

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