Improving Prewean Mortality

There are many factors that determine a sow farm’s ability to maximize the number of pigs sent out the door. Of these, prewean mortality is an important parameter that can almost always be improved. This month Drs. Gil Patterson and Laura Schulz-Dalquist give us an overview of what’s involved with PWM and some tips on how to improve it.

Losing piglets is frustrating and in many cases unnecessary. An important thing to remember with prewean mortality is that when it is not a priority, the numbers will show this. Industry or company averages of prewean mortality are helpful to determine where a farm stands in comparison to others, but should not develop into an attitude of what is acceptable for a particular farm. Constantly challenging ourselves to improve piglet survival is a great way to display our compassion for and commitment to raising hogs. It will not only translate into more market pigs to sell, but it is also the right thing to do.

The greatest opportunity to improve prewean mortality is during the first three days of the pigs’ life. Studies have shown that during this time approximately 60% of prewean losses will occur. This is the time period in which pigs are most vulnerable and are thus more likely to become chilled, starved-out, or laid on. This is where reinforcing the importance of individual pig care to farm employees can go a long way. It can sometimes be easy for farrowing room staff to get wrapped up in protocols and daily chores, when in reality some of the most basic principles of raising pigs are needed. Ensuring a clean, dry environment with a warm mat to sleep on, along with ensuring that each pig has a full belly of colostrum, can improve the survivability of a piglet perhaps more than anything else. Drying powders, towels, hot boxes, and split suckling are all tools that can be used to help achieve this objective. Having the appropriate tools listed above is important, but they are no substitute for a well-trained staff who focuses on identifying and working with pigs that are in trouble, while still providing enough care to those that don’t need as much attention. It is important for the farrowing staff to be able to make this distinction in order to use their time effectively and efficiently. An employee that understands that their objective is to focus on keeping pigs alive, rather than to cross items off a checklist, will have much better success.

It is common knowledge that laid-on piglets will almost always make up the largest proportion of prewean deaths. Although some lay-ons are virtually unpreventable, there are several factors that lead to laid on pigs that can be identified and fixed. Close examination of the farrowing environment may help diagnose...
the cause of the laid on pigs. Room temperatures must be appropriate for the sow and litter, and mats and heat lamps should be adjusted based on piglet laying patterns. Infrared thermometers are great for determining a proper mat temperature of 95 degrees. Drafts or air leaks that are chilling piglets and thus drawing them closer to the sow need to be removed. Also, piglet movements need to be reviewed to ensure that the staff is not moving too many pigs, potentially putting them at a disadvantage. Identifying pigs that are potentially in trouble with chalk/paint and tracking them throughout the day is a method that works well to determine fostering needs and evaluate the success of fostering decisions.

Proper colostrum management is critical to reducing/maintaining a low prewean mortality. Each pig needs a full belly of colostrum on day 1 to provide them with the antibodies essential for growth and survival. Split suckling boxes are used to ensure that all of the smaller pigs in the litter have the same access to a functional teat as the larger pigs in the litter, therefore allowing all pigs to receive adequate colostrum. Along with split suckling, some of the smaller, critical pigs will require intensive care, such as being held onto the teat to suckle, having colostrum stripped out into their mouths, or being fed with colostrum in a syringe. Runt pigs should be placed on P2 or P3 sows with a good udder to give them the best chance for survival. At the end of the day, the farrowing room crew should be confident that every pig has a belly full of colostrum. If not, it is likely that these pigs will continue to affect prewean mortality.

Saving as many viable pigs as possible should be a priority on all farms. Concentrating efforts during the first three days of life and focusing on the most common reasons for piglet death loss can result in fast and noticeable improvements in prewean mortality. Disease or stress may present additional challenges, but the fact remains that the faster a farrowing staff can help the piglets get their bellies full of colostrum and become acquainted with their new environment, the quicker that prewean mortality will improve.

**SVC WELCOMES WANDA ANTHONY TO OFFICE STAFF**

We are pleased to announce the addition of warehouse and customer service specialist Wanda Anthony to the SVC team. Wanda grew up on a crop farm in rural Lafayette, MN. She has a secretarial degree from Hutchinson Vocational College and is a previous employee of L.R. Anthony, Inc. in Norseland, MN. Wanda enjoys camping, boating, scrapbooking, therapy dog visits and spending time with her family in rural St. Peter, MN.

*Please join us in welcoming Wanda to Swine Vet Center!*