

## Babcock moving to new sow housing

By Heather Carlile

hcarlile@agrinews.com

The new loose sow housing system at Babcock Genetics will know specific amounts of food for each pig based on her gestation phase and when she is ready to meet a gentleman caller.

The company purchased a TEAM Sow Management System from Osborne Industries of Osborne, Kan.

"It is gilt development that got us originally interested in the Osborne TEAM System," said Jim Schneider, the senior geneticist at Babcock. Gilts ate too much and grew too big before they mated in their old open pen gilt development system.

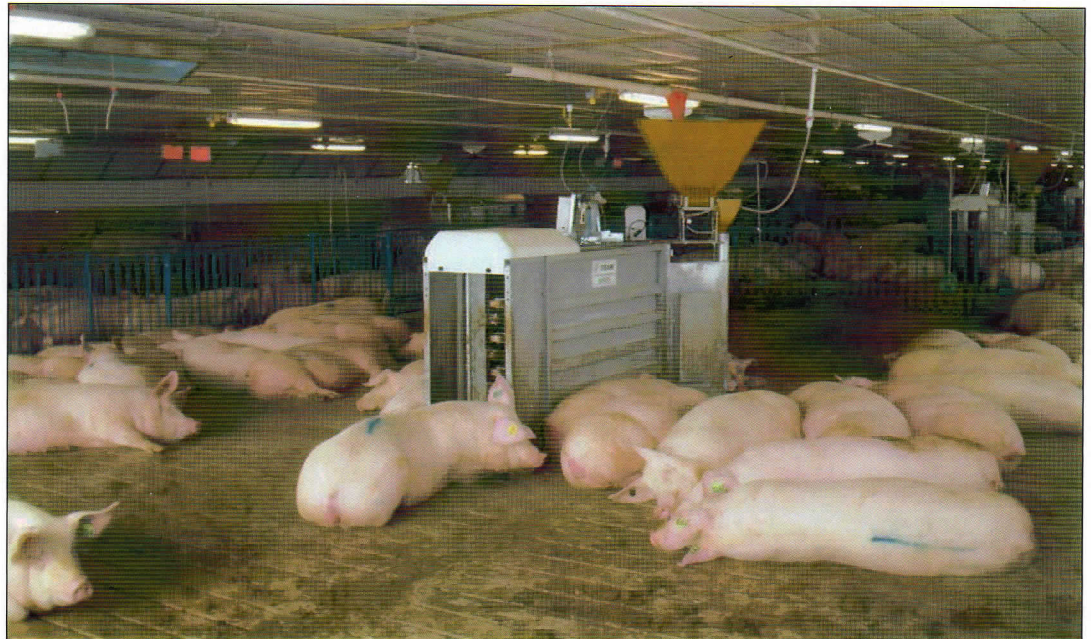
The company also invested in the new system because sows had outgrown some stalls. Additionally, many stalls were old and would soon need to be replaced.

One out of the five buildings to receive loose sow housing on Babcock's LaCrosse, Wis., site has already been refitted and five groups of sows have been introduced to the new system. The transition for all buildings is expected to take seven months.

Each Babcock sow will be allocated at least 21 square feet for free movement in a pen with others.

The computerized feeding system will control and monitor how much feed each sow eats while preventing overconsumption.

Now when a Babcock sow wants to eat, she enters a workstation that shields her from any neighbors who are also feeling hungry. After being electronically identified, the feeding system provides water and a specific diet for her. The sows won't need to be aggressive to access food.



**Sows are shown in a TEAM Sow Management System sold by Osborne Industries. Babcock Genetics is switching its facilities to the TEAM System.**

"There is a real feed savings under this kind of system," said Schneider.

According to Ron Thibault, vice president of marketing and engineering at Osborne Industries, the savings in Babcock's new system could be between one to one and a half pounds of feed per day per sow compared to gestation crates.

"On a 2,000-sow farm, this is a ton of feed per day!" he said.

Babcock's system will also be equipped with computerized heat detection. Electronic identification ear tags alert Babcock employees to how many times females choose to interact with a boar in the pen.

Thibault said the new system will contribute to animal welfare, decrease logistical tasks for management and improve working conditions for employees.

Schneider said Babcock geneticists have been culling for disposition since the company's beginning in the late 1960s. The

selection and a closed herd gene pool have given their sows docile dispositions. The breeding company sees this as an advantage as they enter loose sow housing systems.

"Years ago, I was involved in an alternative version of loose sow housing with other genetics. Fighting occurred on a daily basis," said Schneider.

Still, the company is leaning on experienced employees to watch for any potential problems.

"The people who work with the sows on a daily basis need to be able to spot problems, and to get to know their animals well enough to see what is normal for each animal," said Keely Rykken, production supervisor of Babcock's nucleus herds.

Babcock estimates that the cost of their new feed system, mating receptivity detection and installation will be more than \$200 per female.

Thibault stressed that Babcock's investment isn't

representative of an average commercial TEAM system. The company installed one of the smaller systems, but included all additional options and gave a generous allowance of space for sows.

He said the investment for most commercial TEAM Sow Management Systems could be as low as about \$115 per sow.

He added that the TEAM Management System for large-pen gestation usually costs roughly \$50 to \$65 per sow less than equivalent conventional barns with gestation crates.

Other players in the industry are making similar decisions to change their gestation systems. Smithfield Foods and Cargill have decided to move away from gestation crates.

Florida and Arizona have both passed laws to stop the use of gestation crates.

Loose sow housing hasn't yet been proven to produce baby pigs more effectively.