

Six men for 2,700 sows

Filip Verschelde from Belgium has a total of four farms in eastern Germany. Employing relatively few he can manage all of them - by using an optimal logistical structure and by working with SPF sows.

By Robert Bodde

Every little detail in Filip Verschelde's farm (Gnoien, Germany) has been thought about very carefully. Goal: using labour as effectively as possible. For instance: near the ten farrowing sections (having 60 farrowing pens each), there are three sinks. "It's more than one hundred metres to

get from the last farrowing section to the washing area. Placing sinks is cheaper than making people walk too far to wash their hands when aiding a farrowing sow."

Verschelde studied the farm lay out last year. His priorities were effectiveness, hygiene and a low labour need. Eventually he devised a closed roof lay out of 1 hectare. The farm as such consists of four barns, built next to each other, of about 25 metres in width and 100 metres in length each, having a long alleyway in the middle. On the side there are general areas like biosecurity zone, office, refreshment area, workshop, feed kitchen and a simple living unit.

The animals are grouped according to their production phase. Left of the central alleyway are fourteen units containing 100 gestating sows. These

sows live in feeding cubicles with loose housing possibilities. "Loose housing will be there in the end," Verschelde says. Not because he is a big supporter, but because he is compelled by law and because farms this size get inspected regularly.

The farrowing units are right across the central alleyway, on the opposite side. The piglets will be moved off the farm immediately after weaning. Some are sold, others are fattened on Verschelde's farm elsewhere.

Six breeding units, containing 110 sows, are right in front of the farrowing units, parallel to the central alleyway. A 1.8 metres wide alleyway is connecting these units. "To be able to drive the sows easily one needs to have wide, well lit corridors."

In the service units 'guillotines'



Farrowing crates are tight and deep, 1.7 x 2.5 metres but are a bit more spacious than is common. Verschelde is expecting to wean on the average 13 piglets in every litter.



Vershelde pays regular visits to all of his farms, four in total in the German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. The administration is kept in Belgium.

have been introduced: a trapdoor to lock the boar for the sows that need to be inseminated, speeding up the service process. Control over the matings is being carried out by using colour coded ear tags. Vershelde uses Yorkshire, Danish Landrace and F1-hybrid animals. Colour codes prevent the choice of a wrong boar.

All units contain at the most one week's group of animals. They all become empty on an 'all-in all-out' basis to be cleaned and disinfected to break infection chains. Practices well known to grower pigs, but not to sows. "This way diseases will be kept confined to the unit where they first appeared for a long time. Should there be an outbreak like PRRS, the farm can be made free of disease rapidly, by either targeted treatment or in the end, by disposing of a group of animals." Filip, a veterinary graduate, does not have a ready-made control programme. "One has to judge the situation and act accordingly, one cannot judge something like that beforehand."

Educating your own employees

The housing technicians are still busy installing the last farrowing and gestation units. Still, already over 1,500 productive sows are

housed in the building. Three employees can manage this number rather quickly, they even assist in constructing pen equipment. However, since the pig herd has started growing by over 500 animals every four weeks, that will soon be finished.

Three extra employees have already been selected from 150 applicants. "It's easy to get new people, but I have to educate them myself," Vershelde says. In case a new employee does not fit into the team in the six month trial period, the contract will not be lengthened.

The capacity to work independently is essential when selecting employees. "Especially since I do not employ a farm manager to tell them what to do. They have to be responsible for their own work and think of solutions to minor problems."

The employees start off on a short-term contract. First there's a two week working experience period at the farm that's been there for years, to be taught what pig breeding is all about. Subsequently they assist with installing the housing systems at the farm, to gain technical knowledge about the systems, applicable later on.

The creation of pairs is the next step; everyone has their own tasks,

linked up as much as possible to their fields of interest.

Educating continues on the work floor, one of Filip's tasks. Every time while paying a visit to a farm, Filip observes his employees' working manners. If he doesn't like what he sees, he will tell the employee concerned. It happened twice during the visit. The farrowing unit employee is being told his posture during work will put a too much strain on his back. Vershelde also checks castrating hygiene, as the topic deserved attention last time. Now everything turns out to be all right. He discusses service management with the breeding unit employee.

Vershelde does not employ a real farm manager, however he does have a production manager, guiding day to day business. The breeding unit employee seems to be the best option to become production manager in the future. "A leader will emerge eventually."

SPF decreasing labour need

Vershelde is expecting six employees will be sufficient in March, when the farm will be at full production with 2,700 sows. The employees will work for 40 hours a week and will be working five to ten paid extra hours. "I'd prefer paying for overtime than employing extra people. Employees have to be busy; the workload should be a bit more than they can cope with in 40 hours. Then their labour effort will be the most efficient."

Vershelde also expects not to be employing extra people during holiday periods. All employees have been jobless for a long time, do not prioritise holiday particularly and are very flexible when taking them.

Vershelde is using Danish SPF sows in all of his farms. The new site will become a multiplication and a breeding farm. Production will be around 30 piglets a year in 2008, just like the level at his other breeding farm. "SPF is a deliberate choice. I can improve labour productivity because healthy animals require less effort." Vershelde thus estimates to save at least one permanent employee at each farm. **PP**