

Managing challenging times in the pig sector worldwide

Pork producers worldwide are facing challenges: they still must cope with African swine fever (ASF), declining hog prices, rising raw materials costs, and, as a result, decreasing profits.

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At the global level, pig prices are falling tremendously. In October 2021, the FAO Meat Price Index was down 0.7% from its September value, making the third monthly decline (FAO, Nov 4th). Pork prices are also seasonally affected and will remain dependent on Covid-19 restrictions.

Additional pressure comes from labour constraints in some markets together with inflation costs, which is putting tension on production margins. Passing on these costs to end-consumers cannot be the only solution, as this may reduce their demand and dampen consumption, especially in income-sensitive countries. The rapid decline in prices and the resulting losses for producers in some markets may slow down herd growth in 2022, but this may help improve herd health and reduce the impacts of ASF.

Reducing the number of animals per farm is happening in China. Due to rising costs and the continued threat of ASF outbreaks, producers are reducing herd size, thus driving the hog process to new lows and forcing high-cost producers to exit.

With global demand remaining weak, China limits imports to balance its supply. Meanwhile, in Europe, pork prices are below the five-year average. German and Dutch producers are expected to liquidate their herds and reduce production in the upcoming months. In the US, hog supplies will be a bit higher than the prior year's levels, but again, rising costs and additional regulatory constraints will influence expansion plans. Only in Brazil, producers remain optimistic as sales to export markets remain strong. However, the rising cost of feed is having an impact on the market.

What can be done to stabilise pork production?

Given the increase in raw material prices and thus feed costs, the reduction of feed costs per kg of meat produced and the performance of sows throughout their lives are essential parameters for profitable pig production. In addition to management strategies, nutrition plays a crucial role in achieving those goals, as more and more attention is being paid to efficient nutrient management.

This is where phytogenic feed additives (PFAs) enter the game. Plants have been used for centuries in human food and medicine as flavour enhancers, preservatives, or healing properties. PFAs, also called phytogenics, contain various active substances such as essential oils, pungent and bitter substances, mucilages, tannins, or saponins

solely derived from herbs, spices, and other plants. Many years of experience and literature have proven that active substances exert various beneficial effects on the digestive and metabolic processes and animal health.

Every piglet counts

Large uniform litters, a high number of weaned piglets, and increased body weights at weaning are the main prerequisites for sows and economic pig breeding performance. The improvement of litter performance in sows can be achieved with phytogenic solutions.

Numerous studies have shown that certain phytogenics can improve feed intake and nutrient digestibility and significantly improve the number of piglets born alive and the birth weight of litters.

Fresta F, a PFA based on carefully selected ingredients from essential oils, flavonoids, pungent substances, and mucilage, has improved nutrient digestibility in sows and weaned piglets (Fig. 1).

A higher feed efficiency ensures that the sow will have the required nutrients available to successfully cope with the metabolic needs throughout gestation, especially during the highly demanding lactation period. The results of a higher number of live-born piglets, higher birth and weaning weights, and less weight loss for the sow herself allow more kg meat to be produced per kg of feed provided to the herd. Active substances from phytogenics not only impact metabolic pathways for more efficient production, but they may also positively influence the health condition of animals. This is extremely important in young piglets at the time of weaning.

During this period of stress, piglets often reduce their voluntary feed intake leading to growth depression and diarrhoea, which is again negatively correlated with the higher veterinary and medication costs and less profit for the farmer. Thus, an effective strategy to maintain piglets' resilience and ensure feed intake is indicated.



Phytogenics can support in various ways: improving the palatability of feed and therefore maintaining and even increasing feed intake after weaning, which results in higher daily gain and body weight; promoting nutrient uptake and digestion for more efficient usage of feed raw materials; reducing bacterial pathogenicity by quorum sensing interference and balancing intestinal microflora and thereby contributing to support the maintenance of intestinal integrity and a healthy gut.

What does this mean to a sow and piglet producer? By supplementing with specific phytogenic solutions, the animals get the best possible natural support in all critical production phases. Consequently, the pig producer will also benefit from more efficient production and healthier animals.

Challenging times call for innovative solutions

Specific phytogenic solutions can maximise efficiency, productivity, and kg of meat produced per sow by improving weight gain and litter homogeneity at birth and weaning.

Trials have shown that piglets receiving specific phytogenic solutions have a higher chance of overcoming the weaning period in better body condition, better growth performance, and fewer intestinal diseases.

These benefits can reduce the need for medication and, therefore, increase the producer's profit. Thus, natural substances can support producers in challenging times to maintain their productivity and financial health.

Fig. 1. Total tract digestibility of dry matter and crude protein in sows supplemented with a phytogenic additive (source: Delacon).

