

Inquiry into pig welfare in Victoria

Submission

Submission Status:

Content Warning: No

Attachment Provided: Yes

Submission to The Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria

This submission has been prepared by Edgar's Mission Farm Sanctuary (registered ACNC charity and a public company limited by guarantee ACN 662035690, ABN [75001177836](#)) in response to The Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria. Author, Pam Ahern, Founder and Director.

January 2024

Who we are

Edgar's Mission is a world-renowned not-for-profit organisation dedicated to the protection of farmed animals. Our sanctuary, based in Lancefield, Victoria, currently offers refuge to just over 400 orphaned, abandoned, neglected or surrendered farmed animals. Since inception in 2003, Edgar's Mission has provided sanctuary and hope to approximately 5000 rescued farmed animals. Many of these animals have come into our care via council pounds or have been surrendered directly to Edgar's Mission by farmers or hobby farmers.

Edgar's Mission seeks to ensure the well-being of these animals either through finding suitable life-long homes for them, or, where this is not possible, providing the sanctuary and care these animals need to have lives truly worth living. Edgar's Mission further provides a much-needed voice for farmed animals world-wide, encouraging a more compassionate way of living.

The inspiration of Edgar's Mission was a pig, rescued in 2003. Since that time Edgar's Mission has had the unique experience of working directly with former farmed animals, and in doing so we have been fortunate to gain much insight into their physical, behavioural and emotional needs.

Edgar's Mission greatly welcomes the opportunity to help inform a more compassionate and knowledge-based legislation for pigs. We greatly welcome the acknowledgement of the sentience of animals in Victoria's Animal Welfare Action Plan of 2018 and trust that any legislation and guidelines that follow will respect and reflect such an understanding.

Preamble – who are pigs?

At the heart of this inquiry are thousands, potentially millions, of highly intelligent, sensitive and sentient animals. As such, due diligence requires an examination of who these animals really are.

The ancestors of domestic pigs were forest-dwelling animals who lived in highly developed social groups. These intelligent, quick-to-learn and gregarious animals would spend a large part of their day foraging and feeding. They would live in matriarchal herds of mothers and their offspring. The males would either roam as solitary agents or form bachelor groups. Within herds (or *sounders* as they are often called, due to the nature of pigs to make "sounds" to indicate where they were in relation to the group), a stable hierarchical order was maintained by avoidance behaviour. A submissive animal would only need to turn their head to signal their intention not to challenge a more dominant sow, and she would move away to another space. This behaviour is thwarted in the confinement conditions of factory farms, where space restrictions prevent the opportunity to retreat and display this natural behaviour. Escalating aggression and injuries (physical and psychological) follow as a result of the inability to escape.

Wild pigs naturally establish resting/sleeping areas with grass, twigs and other materials. In particular, pregnant pigs, driven by internal mechanisms, exhibit pre-parturition behaviour 24 to 48 hours prior to birth. During this period the sow isolates from her group as she becomes more restless and goes in search of a nesting site. Sixteen to 20 hours prior to farrowing, the sow will have selected her site to birth and will go to great lengths collecting sticks, twigs and other forest debris to fashion a "nest". The site selected will ensure maximum protection from predators and the elements, and also prevent her crushing her piglets. She will finish her nest in around two to four hours prior to giving birth to her roughly nine piglets.

On factory farms, this natural behaviour of mother pigs is prevented as she gives birth to up to 15 piglets in barren areas that are often so small she cannot even turn around.

For roughly the first ten days the wild sow will remain in the nest or close to it, only leaving to defecate, eat, drink and explore. The piglets would remain in the nest for the first 36 hours. On returning to the nest, the sow signals her return with a series of grunts. Readily recognising this, the piglets group to one side, whereby the sow will, with the use of her robust snout, dig a farrow to lie in, going down first on her knees. She will strategically fall to the side away from her piglets, as she then lowers her hind quarters. A scream from a piglet who had inadvertently snuck under the sow will cause her to rise swiftly and reposition. Should a piglet get trapped under the sow, the soft spongy nature of the elaborate nest allows the baby to wriggle their way out. During the time of suckling, the sow will “sing” to her babies with a series of rhythmic grunts.

Around 10 to 14 days the nest is abandoned, and the sow will return to her herd with her piglets trotting behind. Natural weaning of piglets would occur between 13 to 22 weeks by a gradual process, as opposed to periods as short as the 21-day abrupt human-induced weaning afforded piglets on factory farms.

It has been shown that although domestication and selective breeding has altered some aspects of physiology and anatomy of pigs, there are no major differences in their behaviour as a result. In short, a pig knows how to be a pig. Sadly, factory farming does not permit them to be so.

[The scope, application, compliance with and enforcement of relevant existing regulatory frameworks and their ability to promote pig welfare outcomes](#)

The current framework for the protection and well-being of pigs lies with a Code of Practice. This Code of Practice circumvents the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986* (Vic.), thereby allowing for otherwise cruel practices, procedures, housing and slaughter. It is overseen by an industry-based compliance team. Such self-regulation does not provide the public with a sense of unbiased actions or industry favoured outcomes.

Legal practices that can be afforded pigs, that are illegal if the animal were considered a domestic pet, include teeth clipping, cutting off tails and cutting out genitals by non-veterinary professionals without any requirement for pain-relief. It is permissible to kill sick and injured piglets, without any veterinary consultation. A most common method is by smashing them against a hard surface.

Operating behind closed doors and in remote paddocks, the task of shining a light, and indeed a beacon of hope for pigs in Victoria has fallen to brave whistle-blowers and not-for-profit charity groups. Both have risked much in doing so. In fact, the basis of this inquiry has been borne out of the work of not-for-profit group, Farm Transparency Australia.

Their work has shown that industry has repeatedly failed pigs, and also consumers who thought they were supporting “higher” welfare for these hapless animals. Findings of the Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into the Regulation of Australian Agriculture 2019 support the view that Australians care about animal well-being and seek to make choices that reflect this. However, with a glaring gap in product labelling, this is not always possible.

Most Victorians take some measure of comfort in our animal protection laws, yet few know that pigs and other animals who are farmed for food and fibre have been specifically exempted from those laws. Most people do not wish to partake in acts of cruelty, yet by purchasing pork, ham and bacon products, they unwittingly do. With no scientific justification for the arbitrary line in the sand that determines whether an animal is a friend or food, this urgently needs a societal and legislative overhaul to address this short-coming.

Factory farming, often referred to a “intensive” farming, reflects the intense number of animals confined into small areas (not intensive care, as some may wrongly believe). This method of farming permits animals to be severely confined. These naturally clean animals, who, given the chance, will designate their toilet area away from their sleeping and eating areas, are forced to lie in their own excrement and that of other pigs.

Such conditions give rise to potential physical and psychological issues. Moreover, intensive animal agriculture risks “treating animals as disposable resources” and denies the animals the ability to satisfy their natural behaviours, along with compromising their emotional well-being.

That industry accepts injury, pain and suffering as inherent in their activities is evidenced by the use of such words as “unnecessary,” “minimises,” “least practicable,” that are littered throughout their Standards.

Increased scientific research over recent years into animal cognition and emotion is informing us that animals, in particular farmed animals including pigs, are far more cognitively aware and socially complex than previously thought. The result is driving change within industry (albeit not fast enough; see sections below) to provide better care for the animals whilst attempting to increase productivity and sustainability. The degree to which they are successful on this front is questionable, for the interests of the animals are always trumped by those of the humans who control/own them. Outside of the industry, it is causing many people to review their dietary choices, and companies to invest in plant-based foods. Astute observers are now investing in this lucrative area.

[The ability of the most common methods used to stun pigs before slaughter \(including electrical stunning and exposure to high concentrations of carbon dioxide gas\) in Victorian slaughterhouses to minimise pain, suffering and distress and prevent injury, and available alternatives](#)

That whistle-blower footage of industry-purported best-practice method of killing pigs, carbon dioxide gas, has shown horrific animal suffering and lead to the closure of an abattoir shows that not only can the industry not be trusted, but that there is no humane way to kill pigs.

The intelligence of pigs includes a keen emotional contagion. That is, they pick up on the emotional responses/cues and actions of other pigs. This is one of the major reasons why moving/handling of pigs in highly stressful situations is most problematic. Through transportation, penning and movements, pig groupings are often changed, leading to additional strain on animals who are already stressed.

Seen for their endearing qualities rather than their uses, pigs could easily be mistaken for the much-loved household dog. With this in mind, there can be no humane way to farm or kill them (beyond reasons of health-compromising congenital issues, incurable illness, unmanageable pain, and suffering or misadventure resulting in irreparable damage).

With the growing lucrative market in alternative plant-based pork products, there can be no justification for the continuation of these cruel practices.

[The outcomes of the 2017 industry-led phase-out of the use of sow stalls](#)

In 2010 the Australian pork industry committed to a voluntary phase out of sow stalls by 2017. This resulted from consumer concerns that were brought about by exposes from animal advocacy groups and activists. However, like the sheep industry’s commitment to phase out mulesing by 2010, neither has occurred.

Current industry-accepted methods of housing pigs – sow stalls, farrowing crates and restrictive confinement for breeding boars – are at odds with the natural behaviours of pigs and highlight the industry’s pursuit of profits over animal well-being. With several countries having already banned these cruel practices, Australia is left lagging behind on the world stage of animal protection.

In 2003, the year Edgar’s Mission came into being, the Australian Pork Limited (APL) refused to make a commitment to phasing out sow stalls, stating it was not in the interests of pigs, adding that group housing posed serious risks to the well-being of the pregnant animals. To a degree, group housing can pose risks to pregnant animals; however, what should be considered is the area of confinement, not that pigs will naturally harm one another. Here again, the constraints of profit and space limit the animal’s ability to satisfy their natural behaviours and establish their own

territories. Put simply, to give pregnant sows the area and materials they need to safely birth their babies is not profitable to many in the pig industry.

Little confidence can be placed upon the industry for doing the right thing by pigs, given they have repeatedly been exposed for not doing so. For example, in 2022 Farm Transparency Project investigated several piggeries within Victoria and relayed the tragedy of sows still being confined in pens for weeks on end. Many displaying the often-seen stereotypical behaviour of bar biting, swaying and sham chewing that results from such restrictive confinement.

Current pig breeding and housing practices

Renowned animal behaviourist, Temple Grandin, in her and Catherine Johnson's book, *Making Animals Happy*, lists many instances of confinement compromising animal welfare. Of note, Grandin cites the frustration of pigs in confinement facilities: "most commercially farmed pigs are bored and lack stimulation, but sows locked up in sow stalls are in the worst condition. The stall activates the RAGE system when a sow is first put inside because it is a severe form of restraint, which frustrates the animal ... All animals need to move and are motivated to move, including pigs".

Professors A F Fraser (Professor of Veterinary Surgery, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada) and D M Broom (Department of Clinical Veterinary Medicine, University of Cambridge, U.K.) write extensively on the subject of compromised welfare of pigs in confinement. They state of pigs: "Their learning ability is considerable, and their social behaviour elaborate. As a consequence, welfare problems arise for pigs if they are unable to control events in their environment, if they are frustrated or if they are subjected to unpredictable situations. For example, inability to prevent attack by another pig, to regulate body temperature, or to groom adequately can all lead to poor welfare".

Of sows they write, "Some sows are culled because they do not become pregnant and others because they have small litters. These reproductive failures or inadequacies can occur because the sow encounters difficult conditions and has difficulty in trying to cope with them".

Further, ammonia concentrations within factory farm piggeries pose a risk to both animal health and the health of the workers within the sheds.

Over the years, we here at Edgar's Mission have had firsthand experience witnessing the lengths sows will go to in order to build a nest to birth their piglets, creating a safe and permeable structure where the piglets can retreat and not be crushed by the mother sow. Mother sows, we have witnessed, alert their babies of their intention to lie down. Should a piglet be in harm's way, the piglet's cry causes the sow to regroup, snout the little one out of the way, then find a suitable nesting area.

It should be noted that commercial breeds of pigs/sows have been bred for maximum piglet birthing. These large sows are not as agile in movement as their less commercially bred cousins. The restrictions placed on mother pigs in farrowing crates not only frustrates their natural mothering instincts but is at odds with their natural behaviours.

International industry best practice standards.

According to the World Animal Protection Society, Australia scores a lowly "E" on their Animal Protection Index for "Protecting animals used for farming." This index "is a ranking of 50 countries around the globe according to their legislation and policy commitments to protecting animals."

Contributing to this low ranking is the provision for continued use of sow stall and farrow crates, along with castration, tail-docking, teeth-clipping being acceptable methods of reducing aggression among pigs. It is also noted that these procedures can be carried out without an obligation for anaesthesia (<https://api.worldanimalprotection.org/country/australia#Standards>).

Despite several countries including the United Kingdom and Sweden, banning sow stalls and farrowing crates, such archaic practices are still permitted within Victoria.

Conclusion

The fate of pigs in commercial farming is one of the most pressing animal ethical issues of our time.

The sentient capacities of animals must be considered by decision makers when determining legislation regarding the treatment and use of them. Reasons of profit or human want should not trump the well-being of the animals themselves. Classifying an animal as a farm animal does not circumvent the animal's ability to suffer, nor should it provide a legal justification for the breeding, treatment and killing of said animal.

The establishment of a separate department from that of agriculture to oversee the well-being of farmed animals is as essential as it is urgent.

The phasing out of animal-based industries by way of government assistance for farmers with the option to transition into plant-based alternatives to animal products is imperative.

With South Korea set to ban the slaughter and sale of dog for meat, this should cause us to consider that it is only an accident of geography that the dog is our family pet and not our food. This should further prompt us to ask the question, "If we could live happy and healthy lives without harming pigs, why wouldn't we?"

References and further reading

Australian Productivity Commission, (2016) Regulation of Australian Agriculture. Productivity & Inquiry Report

Blackshaw JK. (1981). Some behavioural deviations in weaned domestic pigs: persistent inguinal nose thrusting, and tail and ear biting. *Animal Production* 33:325-32.

Broom DM 2016. Animal sentience - considering animals' feelings.

<https://animalstudiesrepository.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1015&context=animsent>

Broom, DM (2015) Sentience and pain in relation to animal welfare.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4a8f/d88b09d92234fbf6587c1f873e3c731f44f3.pdf>

Craig, J V. (1982) "Pregnant sow behavior when housed in groups and singly," *Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station Research Reports*: Vol. 0: Iss. 10. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5977.6090>

Croney, C.C. (1999). Cognitive abilities of domestic pigs. Thesis in Animal Science, The Pennsylvania State University, College of Agricultural Sciences, 1–105.

Forkman, B., Furuhaug, I.L., & Jensen, P. (1995). Personality, coping patterns, and aggression in piglets. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 45, 31–42.

Fraser, A & Broom, D, (1996) *Farm Animal Behaviour and Welfare*. CABI

Futureeye (2018). Australia's Shifting Mindset on Farm Animal Welfare.

<http://www.agriculture.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/animal/farm-animal-welfare.pdf>

Gosling, S. & John, O.P. (1999). Personality dimensions in nonhuman animals. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 8, 69–75.

Grandin, T & Johnson C, (2009) *Making Animals Happy*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

Held, S., Baumgartner, J., Kilbride, A., Byrne, R.W., & Mendl, M. (2005). Foraging behaviour in domestic pigs (*Sus scrofa*): Remembering and prioritizing food sites of different value. *Animal Cognition*, 8, 114–121.

Hodges J (1999). *Livestock Ethics and Quality of Life*. CABI publishing.

Horback, K. (2014). Nosing around: Play in pigs. *Animal Behavior and Cognition*, 1(2), 186–196.

Marino, L. & Colvin, C. (2015). Thinking Pigs: A Comparative Review of Cognition, Emotion, and Personality in *Sus domesticus*. *International Journal of Comparative Psychology*, 28, 1–22.

Martin, J.E., Ison, S.H., & Baxter, E.M. (2015). The influence of neonatal environment on piglet play behaviour and post-weaning social and cognitive development. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 163, 69–79.

Pedersen, L.J., Herskin, M.S., Forkman, B., Halekoh, U., Kristensen, K.M. & Jensen, M.B. (2014). How much is enough? The amount of straw necessary to satisfy pigs' need to perform exploratory behavior. *Applied Animal Behavior Science*, 160, 46–55.

Reimert, I., Bolhuis, J. E., Kemp, B., & Rodenberg, T. (2013). Indicators of positive and negative emotions and emotional contagion in pigs. *Physiology and Behavior*, 109, 42–50.

Telkanranta, H., Bracke, M. B.M. & Valros, A. (2014). Fresh wood reduced tail and ear biting and increases exploratory behavior in finishing pigs. *Applied Animal Behavior Science*, 161, 51–59.