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Husbandry practices in suckling piglets on alternative farms and farmers' perception of the pigs' pain

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BACKGROUND & AIM

Alternative pig farms, in which animals have outdoor access or are raised in enriched environments, are believed to provide improved animal welfare compared to confined farms. Breeding procedures performed on piglets such as castration, teeth clipping and tail docking may cause pain. The aim of this study was to describe the frequency of these practices in alternative farms and how they were perceived by farmers.

RESULTS

Farm description:

- 80 farrow-to-finish farms and 12 farrow-to wean herds
- Average of 112 sows per farm (+/- 138)
- 73% of the herds were organic, 11% were involved in the French quality program 'Label Rouge'.

Surgical castration:

- Piglets castrated on 85 out of 92 farms (92,3%)
- Age at castration : 6.3 days (min=1; max=28 days) (figure 1)
- Anesthesia used in 6 farms (7%)
- Analgesia used in 51 farms (60%), including 30 with meloxicam
- Cold spray applied in 28 farms (33%)
- One farm with immunocastration instead of surgical castration

Teeth clipping/grinding:

- Carried out on 6 farms
- At an average age of 1.3 days (min=1; max=3 days)
- Anesthesia or analgesia on any farm

Tail docking:

- Carried out on 13 farms
- At an average age of 5.2 days (min=1; max=28 days)
- Anesthesia in no farm
- Analgesia used on 3 farms (23%)
- Cold spray applied on 2 farms (15%)

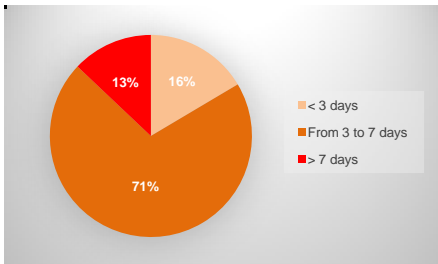


Figure 1: Distribution of farms according to average age at castration (male piglets).

MATERIAL & METHODS

The study was conducted in 92 alternative pig farms (size > 30 sows), in continental France (figure 4), from June 2020 to February 2022. On each farm, it was recorded whether the piglets experienced castration, teeth clipping or tail docking, and any pain management procedures set up. The farmers were also asked about their perception of the animals' pain levels during these procedures. Data were collected during an on-farm visit.

Farmers' perception:

94% of farmers felt that castration was the most painful procedure (figure 2), well ahead of tail docking (5%) and teeth removal (2%).

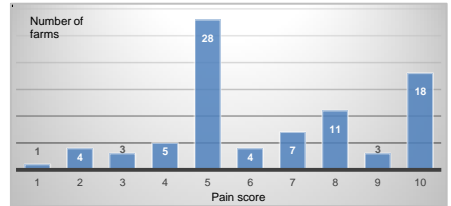


Figure 2: Distribution of pain scores attributed by farmers to castration (1: not very painful / 10: very painful; n = 84)

Castration is also considered arduous by farmers (mean score = 5.9/10 ; figure 3).

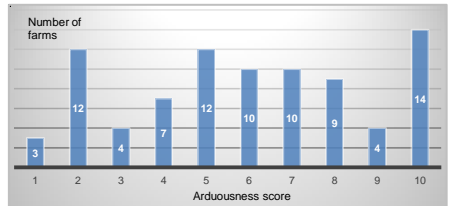


Figure 3: Distribution of the arduousness scores attributed by farmers to castration (1: not very arduous / 10: very arduous; n = 85)

Among the 85 farmers practicing castration, 63 expressed their desire to stop it, with 23% of them preferring to adopt immunocastration.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlighted that teeth clipping/grinding and tail docking were not widely practiced on alternative pig farms in France, in accordance with organic specifications, a system mostly represented in the studied sample. However, male castration remained a prevalent practice that farmers wish to cease, primarily for welfare concerns and because of the tediousness of the procedure.

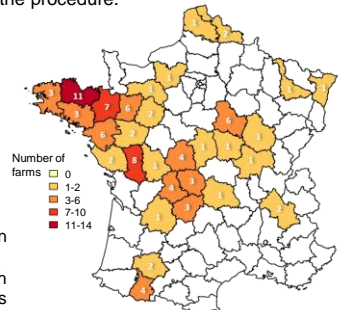


Figure 4: Distribution of farms