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### Largest Pork Processor to Phase Out Crates

Va.-Based Smithfield to End Practice of Keeping Pregnant Pigs in Small Cages

By [Marc Kaufman](#)  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Friday, January 26, 2007; Page A06

The largest U.S. pork supplier, Virginia-based [Smithfield Foods](#), said yesterday that it will require its producers to phase out the practice of keeping pregnant pigs in "gestation crates" -- metal and concrete cages that animal welfare advocates consider one of the most inhumane features of large-scale factory farming.

Activists hailed the decision as perhaps the most significant voluntary improvement ever made in animal welfare, but they said the stage had been set by the recent passage of two state initiatives that would ban the use of the crates.

Smithfield officials denied that pressure from activists or voters had anything to do with their announcement, but they did say the company was responding to concerns voiced by customers such as [McDonald's](#) and several supermarket chains.

While they defended the use of the crates -- which are so narrow that the animals cannot turn around and some have to lie uncomfortably on their chests -- they said their own research had concluded they could be replaced by group pens without any long-term problems or cost increases.

"Working with our customers, who have made their views known on the issue of gestation stalls, we are pleased to be taking this precedent-setting step," said C. Larry Pope, chief executive officer of Smithfield Foods. He said all 187 Smithfield-owned pig nurseries would be converted within 10 years, and contract growers will be eventually expected to move in that direction.

"I can't think of anything more important in terms of humane treatment of animals that has occurred in the agribusiness sector," said Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States. "They are the market leader, and this decision changes the dynamic of the industry. It's going to be very hard for other companies to not follow Smithfield."

The decision follows a pattern that has become increasingly common in the food industry. Groups concerned about issues such as animal welfare or the use of antibiotics or biotechnology in agriculture no longer look to government regulators to produce change, but rather take their concerns to the public, to producers, and to the restaurants and grocery chains that sell the products.

The Humane Society, Farm Sanctuary and others led successful public initiative campaigns in Arizona last year and in Florida in 2004 to prohibit use of the gestation cages.

McDonald's has been particularly active on the animal welfare issue, and it set an industry precedent several years ago by creating a panel of outside experts to recommend best practices. Some members of that panel identified gestation crates as a particularly inhumane practice, and McDonald's expressed interest in reducing or eliminating the amount of pork it buys from companies that rely on the crates. In a statement yesterday, McDonald's hailed the Smithfield decision, saying it was in line with advice it got from panel member Temple Grandin in particular, a leading animal welfare expert and author.

Female pigs selected for breeding in most large pig nurseries are artificially impregnated early in their lives and soon after placed in the crates for their four-month pregnancies. According to Grandin, productive sows will spend several years in the cages while giving birth to five to eight litters. But as the sows get larger over the years, some cannot fit in the cages and are either slaughtered or forced to live in conditions where they can sleep only on their chests, rather than their sides as they do normally.

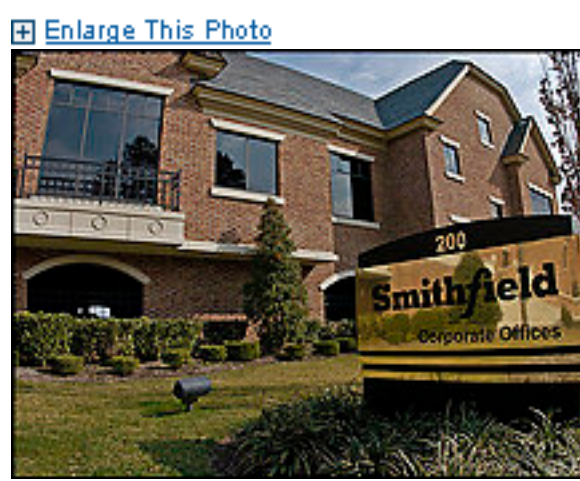
Pork producers and many veterinarians argue that the animals do well separated in the crates and are prone to fighting if housed together in pens. But animal advocates say the pigs suffer greatly in the 2-by-7-foot cages, with many chewing on metal bars and endlessly waving their heads. Grandin said many sows in narrow crates show behaviors she considers abnormal -- a sign, she said, that they are suffering. The crates have been banned in Europe for some time.

In a statement, National Pork Producers Council CEO Neil Dierks said that while his group "respects the right of all producers to make market decisions they believe are in their best interest," the council considers gestation crates to be appropriate and humane.

"The American Veterinary Medical Association and other organizations recognize gestation stalls and group housing systems as appropriate for providing for the well-being of sows during pregnancy," he said. "We support the right of all producers to choose housing that ensures the well-being of their animals and that is appropriate for their operations."

Dennis Treacy, Smithfield's vice president for environmental and corporate affairs, said his company will phase out the gestation stalls over the next decade and will retrain staff in how to keep the animals from fighting.

He said that the policy shift was a business decision and that the company does not consider the crates inhumane. But, he said, "We've heard increasing questions from customers about whether sow crates are good or bad, whether they're the way to go in the future. Given our research, we decided to go another way."



Smithfield Foods, whose Virginia headquarters is shown, is being hailed for phasing in a ban on the confinement of pregnant sows to 2-by-7-foot crates. (By Gary C. Knapp -- Associated Press)

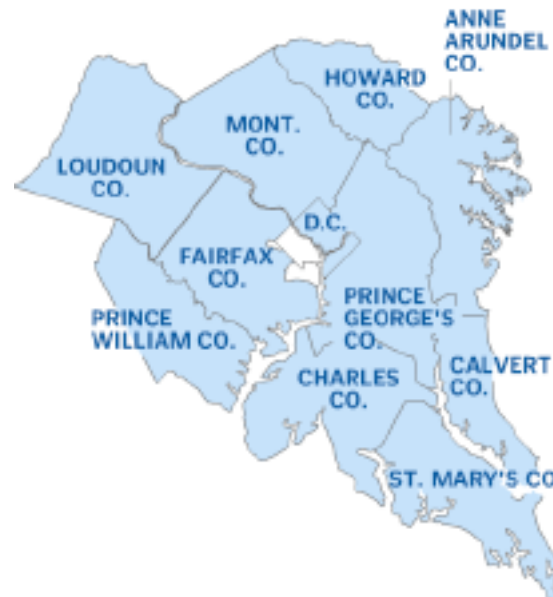
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