

## How to Move and Handle Pigs

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### Introduction

An important factor associated with animal welfare is the proper movement and handling of pigs. Pigs can be hard to move if frightened or not accustomed to being moved. Improper handling decreases animal welfare by causing stress and fear, may increase safety risks for both the pig and handler, and also results in a decrease in meat quality (i.e. bruising; PSE pork, a meat that is pale, soft, and exudative; or DFD pork, a meat that is dark firm and dry) that can cost the industry millions of dollars each year.. In short improving animal handling improves animal welfare, safety, meat quality, and may improve your bottom line.

### The Human Factor

Handling pigs can be stressful for both the animals and the handlers. Handling pigs with care, gentleness, and patience can reduce stress. Handlers must remember that the pigs do not understand the objective of your work and have little experience being moved. Calm pigs are easier to sort and separate than excited pigs. Pigs are easier to sort if the handler moves slowly, quietly, and deliberately.

Handlers should:

- have patience, allowing pigs to explore their environment as they move forward
- stay calm
- not rush pigs
- not yell
- not use aggressive handling methods
- be familiar to the pigs



### Understanding Animal Behavior Can Improve Hog Handling

Although pigs are extremely curious and like to explore, new experiences and environments can also be extremely stressful to hogs. The more experience that pigs

have with their handlers and with being moved the less stressed they will be. Although pigs have poor vision their natural curiosity for, and/or fear of, new areas are likely to cause them to stop and investigate areas while being moved. For this reason visual distractions, such as changes in color, gaps, shadows, open outer walls, etc., need to be minimized. This can usually be achieved by using solid panels in alleys and ramps to block sights and sounds. Other characteristics of pigs to keep in mind:

- Pigs have poor depth perception immediately in front of them, with eyes located on the side of their head, and a 310 degree panoramic view. This means that hogs have a 50 degree blind spot immediately behind them.
- Pigs have excellent hearing and an acute sense of smell. This means that they are likely to stop and investigate smells that humans cannot detect.
- Pigs are herd animals and do not like to be left alone. Being isolated from other pigs is extremely stressful.
- Pigs prefer to be moved in small groups, and have a strong natural tendency to follow each other while maintaining both visual and body contact. Large groups are more difficult to move, which can increase heart rate, respiration rate, injuries due to fighting and loading time.
- Pigs have excellent memories and can remember both positive and negative experiences for long periods of time. Minimizing negative experiences with handlers is likely to improve animal handling and loading time.
- Pigs tend to move towards a more brightly-lighted area, and are reluctant to move into dark areas. Minimizing lighting variation as well as lighting the interior of vehicles and other areas pigs are being moved to should improve loading.

## Handling Tools

There are numerous handling tools that can be used on farms to move animals in a safe, humane and efficient manner

1. Sorting boards
2. Plastic “rattle” paddles
3. Nylon flags
4. Plastic ribbons tied to sticks
5. Witch’s capes



The use of the electric prods should be avoided if possible. Recent industry studies indicate that that sorting boards are more effective in moving pigs when compared to electric prods or plastic paddles.

Prodding animals at the back of the group is an inefficient and stress inducing way to move animals at the front of the group. Prod use is very stressful and can cause both pain and fear. The use of the electric prod increases body temperature, heart rate and the incidence of non-ambulatory pigs in both university and industry studies.

When electric prods are used, animals should never be prodded in sensitive areas such as the eyes, nose, anus, testicles, etc.

## Minimize Aversive Handling

Some aversive handling methods are less obvious than the electric prod but their use should also be minimized. These include:

- Loud noise and yelling
- Moving pigs too fast
- Moving pigs in groups that are too large
- Overcrowding
- Stationary periods that are too long

## Behavioral Indicators of Stress During Handling

It is essential that handlers are able to identify when pigs are being stress during handling and take appropriate action. Indicators of stress include

- Open mouth breathing (panting)
- Vocalization (squealing or barking)
- Blotchy skin (reddish/purple color)
- Stiffness
- Muscle tremors (animals begin shaking)
- Increased heart rate
- Increased body temperature

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