

## Frank's Note

*Farmweld* has reached a landmark as we are now in the middle of celebrating our 40th anniversary. Back in May 1979, I was a welder and started this company with the determination to build better products to solve problems for pig farmers.

When you think back at the number and type of changes that have occurred in pork production during those 40 years, it is truly mindboggling. We've seen the industry move and shift, try new things and, in some cases, return to tried-and-true practices. For some producers, this has meant transitioning away from wean-to-finish barns and back to nurseries; for others, it has meant other forms of innovation. But most importantly, it illustrates one true constant — that everyone has to find the equipment, processes and strategies that best work for them.

At *Farmweld*, we believe the key to continuous improvement is to listen to the people working with the pigs, day in and day out. This has guided us in designing our products, from feeders to gating to stalls and more — all while reflecting the original goal of providing solutions for producers.

The question is what will the next 10, 20 or 40 years bring? Who could have imagined the productivity of today's herds or the size of market hogs? It's safe to say that the farther out you look, the harder it is to envision the concepts that might evolve.

Yes, change is constant, and that's good because we dare not stop innovating.

*Farmweld* is here to provide solutions that work for your operation today and in the future. Our team has years of experience navigating transitions, and they can guide you through the process so you can focus on growing pigs. Call us at 1-800-EAT-PORK (328-7675) or visit [www.farmweld.com](http://www.farmweld.com).



Frank Brummer  
President  
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## Nursery or Wean-to-Finish: Finding What's Best for Pigs and People

**Health, mortality rates and more robust pigs have some producers re-evaluating weaned-pig systems.**



*Courtesy of the National Pork Board, Des Moines, Iowa.*

Pork production practices are an individual preference; what works for one person or farm may not work for another. It's also true that pork producers are always looking for ways to improve, and as the surrounding environment, pig flows, labor force or disease pressures change, management and production systems may need to evolve.

When wean-to-finish barns were introduced, the theory was that moving weaned pigs into a facility and leaving them there through finishing would reduce labor, minimize stress on pigs and limit facility needs. For some producers these barns remain effective, but for others it was time to return to nurseries.

"It's a good model on paper," says Tyler Holden, director of nursery/finish operations with Holden Farms, Northfield, Minnesota. The company had built 45, 2,400-head wean-to-finish barns by 2006, which covered

40 percent of its weaned-pig needs. "We tried different things to make wean-to-finish barns work for the people and the pigs," he says. But with results from their research barns in both systems, Holden Farms started to build nurseries again in 2012. Holden points out the cost of producing a pig was about the same in either system, so economics did not influence the decision.

Holden Farms now has 95 percent of its weaned pigs in nurseries, mostly with contract growers. Holden says the company will keep 5 percent to 10 percent as wean-to-finish barns for seasonal flexibility.

For Hanor, Enid, Oklahoma, some of the motivation to move back to nurseries was due to growth plans. With 465,000 wean-to-finish spaces in Iowa and Illinois in 2016, the company needed to increase production to meet delivery commitments as a partner in Triumph Foods and Seaboard Triumph Foods.

## Driven to Improve Health

Lateral disease pressure, particularly related to porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome (PRRS) and porcine epidemic diarrhea virus (PEDV), is a concern within the swine veterinary community and was a key driver in Hanor's move to nurseries.

"We had struggled with a very virulent strain of PRRS in a number of our farms," says Jim Moody, vice president with Hanor. "We transitioned from attempting to stabilize the disease to an eradication program, which reduced the frequency of PRRS breaks in the downstream flow of pigs."

Hanor veterinarians partnered with Iowa State University to evaluate the cost of disease and determined when a farm has PEDV and PRRS, it costs an additional \$7 a pig. "So, we had to find a way to minimize that lateral disease pressure," Moody adds. "We also needed better biosecurity and pig care for our young-pig sites."

Jessica Johnson, DVM, nursery supervisor for Holden Farms, agrees that addressing PEDV is more effective in nurseries. "Also, our PRRS breaks are 80 percent lower than what they were in wean-to-finish barns," she says.

Another benefit is that more specialized pig care has improved Holden Farm's ability to manage diarrhea and enteric issues. Overall, the company's nursery mortality rate has dropped by 1 percent compared to wean-to-finish barns.

With improved biosecurity in their nurseries, Hanor has seen a downward trend in coronavirus incidence and other lateral disease introductions. The company anticipated some improvement by moving to nurseries, but Moody points out that fewer disease introductions resulted in lower veterinary costs and mortality rates. "In the end, we reduced our veterinary expenses by 27 percent and grow/finish mortality by 30 percent," he adds.



**Jessica Johnson, DVM, nursery supervisor, Holden Farms**

"When combining wean-to-finish facilities with a number of health challenges, we were less than happy with the results we were getting," says Jim Moody, vice president with Hanor.

At the time, the company rented a few nurseries to handle excess production. When comparing the same flow of pigs between the two systems, Hanor found that the pigs in nurseries looked and performed much better. "So, it was a pretty easy decision to look more seriously at nurseries," he adds.

Today, Hanor moves all of its production through 60 nursery sites, which allows for specialized labor to focus on newly weaned pigs, with most of that labor provided by company employees. "This is a significant advantage compared to wean-to-finish sites spread over a large geographic area where caretakers handle weaned-pig groups only twice a year," Moody says.

### The Pigs' Needs

Because wean-to-finish buildings must accommodate just-weaned pigs weighing about 10 pounds and market hogs near 300 pounds, it's understandable that there are compromises. Whether it's ventilation, temperature, feeders or waterers, maintaining the right fit for pigs at any given time is a challenge.

The biggest concern in any facility is getting weaned pigs off to a good start with the right environment and diet. "Our feeders are smaller and easier to manage in the nursery," says Jessica Johnson, DVM, nursery supervisor for Holden

Farms. "The larger feeders in wean-to-finish barns are harder to manage with small pigs." It's easier to match diets to the pigs, meet feed budgets and get the right feeder adjustment in a nursery, she notes.

That benefit also applies to waterers. Johnson points out that smaller nipples and setting a lower water pressure — something she couldn't accomplish in wean-to-finish barns — better accommodates young pigs.

Both companies saw nurseries as a way to improve the building's environment through better ventilation and temperature control. As a test, Moody placed temperature loggers into some wean-to-finish barns to check the wintertime environment. "I was appalled by the temperature highs and lows," he says. "Especially during winter's coldest periods, we struggled to keep grow/finish pigs at the proper temps, let alone weaned pigs."

Eliminating curtains and using power ventilation, actuated inlets, more insulation and insulated concrete sidewalls are some of the features that result in tighter buildings and minimize fluctuations in nurseries.

Holden recommends building in enough ventilation capacity for a worst-case scenario. "We built 4,000-head nurseries but have enough ventilation for 5,000 pigs," he notes. Another bit of advice: "Don't build big. I would build as small as possible that cash flows." Holden Farms has had 6,000-head units but now prefers 4,000-head units with one nursery and person per site.

Hanor targets one caretaker per 6,500 pig spaces, with caretakers overseeing a combination of 2,400- to 4,800-head sites. Both production companies house pigs in small pens of 25 head. This allows for easier piglet monitoring, vaccination and treatment with injectable and water

medications, Johnson notes. Both companies wean around 20 days and fill nurseries within 1 to 2 weeks.

## The Person's Needs

Double-stocking pigs for the first 7 weeks is common in wean-to-finish barns and an original selling point, but it was something both companies struggled with. For Hanor, it added up to too many pigs for proper care and required contract growers to spend more time in the barn than they had planned.

Nurseries offer a more consistent flow compared to wean-to-finish barns with their twice-a-year fill schedule. "It seemed to come at the worst time — planting and harvest, fourth of July and New Year's Eve," Holden says. "Growers wanted to be on a fixed schedule." So, part of their equation was to consider who's happier doing what. "People really like nurseries or finishers — one or the other," he says.

A surprising discovery for Holden Farms was the number of women who



are managing their nurseries, which now is more than half. For some, it's an on-farm job opportunity that can work around day care or while kids are in school. "It's also safer for kids to help in the barns; parents don't have to worry about their kids getting run over by a 300-pound pig. Also, they won't have to worry about removing a 300-pound pig," Holden notes. "It's been a really good fit."

By managing pigs of a narrower weight and age range, the person becomes a specialist, which they like and makes it easier to train individuals on the daily procedures. "They focus on weaned pigs 12 months of the year," Moody notes, adding that labor has been and will continue to be a

struggle for most farms.

## Better Biosecurity

Along with improved pig care, there are significant biosecurity benefits to nursery barns. "The people have created offices and nice showers that are tiled, often with heated floors, making them like home," Johnson says. "They spend a lot of time in there, so it makes them happy, and there are biosecurity benefits."

Moody points out that very few, if any, of Hanor's young-pig sites had shower facilities in 2016. Today, the company has more than 1 million pig spaces, of which about 60 percent have showers; the goal is to get to 100 percent. He adds that porcine epidemic diarrhea virus helped drive biosecurity improvements.

No rendering trucks enter nursery sites for either company. Hanor uses incinerators for piglet mortalities. Holden Farms has a composting bin placed outside of the facility's backdoor, making for efficient removal of mortalities.

## Featuring the **Farmweld Nursery Package**



**Help ensure pigs remain healthy and productive**

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Flooring System  
Water Cups

Challenger Nursery Feeder™



Of course, no market-hog trucks or trailers enter nursery sites, which is not the case with wean-to-finish sites when they begin to top off finishing hogs. It's well established that market-hog transport increases disease exposure risks from plants to farms and back again.


"We just have better control of people and supplies coming in and out of our sites," Moody notes.

Hanor also built its nurseries at dock height, not only making it easier to load/unload pigs, but it eliminated loading chutes and the hassle of cleaning them up, especially in winter.

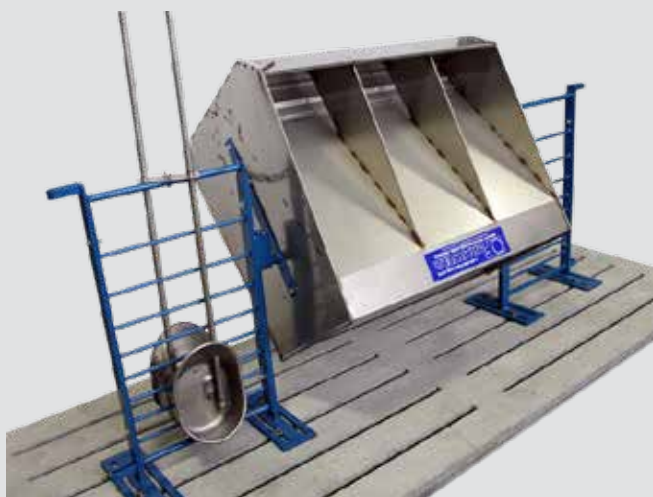
Holden Farms built a loadout option for each room, which shortens the distance to move pigs. It also allows them to control the environment in the loadout room, providing another biosecurity measure.

Then there's the building itself. Nurseries and their coated or plastic flooring are easier to clean than the concrete slats of wean-to-finish barns. "After two or three turns in a building with concrete slats you'll get a lot of buildup," Holden says. Also, because of the load-in/out schedule, nurseries are cleaned about every 7 weeks versus twice a year. On a side

note, Holden recommends any color of nursery flooring but black. "It's too dark; other colors brighten up the room and make it more pleasant," he says. "It's also easier to see if it's been properly washed."

In the end, these production companies, their growers and employees like the transition they've made back to nurseries. "We still make mistakes with our nurseries, but the consequences are not as severe as when we had wean-to-finish barns," Moody says. "We feel that nurseries are simply stacking the odds in our favor." 

## Featuring the **Wean-to-Finish Package**



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Wean-to-finish dry feeding with wide, deep feed pans and added head room



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