Animal Behavior

Introduction
In pork production, more injuries occur during direct contact with the animal than in any other activity. Learning pig behavior will help workers to handle pigs without the need for excessive force, thus reducing the risk of injury to workers and to the pigs. Always be aware of your surroundings and body position in relation to the pigs. This will allow you to safely handle both individual pigs and groups of pigs.

OSHA Standard(s)
The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH Act) requires employers to comply with hazard-specific safety and health standards. In addition, pursuant to Section 5(a)(1) of the OSH Act, often referred to as the General Duty Clause, employers must provide their employees with a workplace free from recognized hazards likely to cause death or serious physical harm.

Hazard
The majority of injuries on a hog farm occur during human/animal interaction. It's important to pay close attention to the potential dangers of working with pigs, and always use correct animal handling techniques. Attention to these dangers is a key to personal safety.

General Characteristics of All Pigs
- **Pigs have a low center of gravity** which makes them quick and agile in small spaces and capable of knocking a person down.
- **Pigs would rather run than fight.** Pigs have a defensive perimeter called a “flight zone.” The pig uses this defense mechanism to distance itself from people and objects that it’s not familiar with or feels threatened by.
- **A pig’s range of vision is nearly 360 degrees.** The only blind area is directly behind the pig. When a person or object comes into the pig’s flight zone, the pig will move in an opposite direction. If the person or object is removed from the flight zone, the pig will usually stop. The size of the flight zone may vary from pig to pig. Pigs also have a tendency to move from a dimly lit area to a more brightly lit area, provided the light is not glaring into their eyes. A spotlight directed onto a ramp will often ease entry.
- **A pig’s decision to move forward or backward is determined by the “point of balance.”** This location is the shoulders of the pig. To move a pig forward, enter the animal’s flight zone just inside its range of vision and behind the point of balance. If someone enters the flight zone in front of the point of balance, the pig will stop or turn back.
- **Pigs like to follow each other in group formation.** It is easier to move a group of pigs forward when the leaders are prompted. It is difficult to move a group forward by prodding the pigs in the back of the group.
Boar Characteristics
- The mating behavior of boars includes grunting, nuzzling, chomping, and a large amount of salivation when in contact with the sow.
- Boars will contact the sow or gilt nose to nose or nose to genital area. They will also lift or push the sow in the area of the rear flank. This is usually not a threat to the pig handler unless this behavior is disrupted.
- Tusks are a major safety concern. A boar can simply raise his head and drive his tusk into the pig handler.
- Boars are unpredictable.
- Always use a sorting board to move or separate a boar from another pig.
- Boars can also be deceiving. They may appear to be tame and unthreatening in some situations, but then suddenly become very aggressive.
- Boars become very large and powerful – do not underestimate the physical power of boars when working with them.

Sow Characteristics
- Sows are typically docile animals. Sows may try to defend their litters and become aggressive if they feel their piglets are threatened.
- Gilts may become aggressive during farrowing.
- Sows and gilts will “lock up” and not move when they are in heat and exposed to boar smells. If they do move, they will walk stiff-legged and you probably will not be able to move them very far.
Nursery Pig Characteristics

• Newborn pigs up to weaning have sharp needle teeth.
• Newborn pigs use their teeth very effectively against the other pigs in the litter.
• Their teeth are their only defense mechanism.
• Although workers generally aren’t seriously injured, they can receive cuts and abrasions from these sharp teeth.

Grower/finisher Characteristics

• Pigs are social animals and want to be with other pigs.
• Be sure to move pigs in small groups.
• Physical or visual isolation from other pigs can be stressful.
• As the pigs grow, they pose more physical threat to workers because of their size.
• Pigs that become excited and stressed become unpredictable.
• In a finishing facility, pigs become curious when a worker enters the pen. They like to chew on worker’s pants and boots.

It’s important that your employees use proper animal handling techniques at every stage of the pork production process. Follow the PQA Plus™ and TQA™ program’s best practices for animal handling.

Make sure your employees are aware of the potential hazards – and the correct procedures to help them avoid the hazards – present in each stage of the pork production process.

FAQs

Q. Why do pigs balk during handling?
A. Pigs will balk during handling if they are distracted by something unfamiliar or unpleasant in their path. Pigs have moderate ability to judge distance and depth and will balk at shadows, drain grates, steps, puddles of water gutters and other high-contrast objects. Light shining or reflecting directly into their eyes will also cause balking. Dramatic changes in temperature and strong air drafts can also cause balking. Pigs will become distracted by other pigs in pens they pass by during movement. By eliminating these distractions, moving the pig will be a smoother process.

Q. What determines the size of a pig’s flight zone?
A. The size of the flight zone will vary from pig to pig and can be influenced by the amount and type of interactions they have with humans. A pig that is very familiar with positive human contact will tend to have a smaller flight zone. A pig that has had negative interactions with humans will have a much larger flight zone.

Links

• Transport Quality Assurance™ (TQA™) http://www.pork.org/Certification/10/tqa.aspx