

Don't Come Up Short in Your Swine Project

Decisions made now will affect your swine project either positively or negatively at fair time. Many 4-H and FFA members find themselves in a battle to make a light pig gain 30 pounds in the last week before the fair because of decisions they made at the beginning of the swine project. Making sound choices early will help to eliminate the stress on you and your parents as the fair draws near. You have invested countless hours and your life savings into a pig that absolutely refuses to gain the weight needed to meet the minimal weight requirement to be sale eligible.

The most critical element to your success is to look for appropriate aged pigs from a reputable producer who is willing to assist you in making the right choices throughout your project. Be careful purchasing pigs from producers who are happy to sell you a young pig, telling you that he will make weight even though he is smaller than the rest of his littermates. A good producer will help you select a pig that is going to be big enough to make weight and is not just concerned with making a sale. Such a producer understands that your success is also his success. You should also look for a leader, agent or parent with some hog showing experience to assist you with purchasing your project.

It is difficult to use a standard figure how much a small pig will gain per day because of the way a pig develops. It works in a cycle with a limit on how much feed it can consume daily. The bigger a pig gets the more he can consume. The more he eats the more he gains, and thus the more he gains the bigger he gets. So if you think this through, the bigger pig can eat more feed and will gain more rapidly. The main limiting factor for gaining weight is the amount of feed a pig can consume in each day. Pigs will generally convert 3 pounds of feed into one pound of gain. It will take a 40 pound pig nearly ten days longer to gain 100 pounds than it will take a 70 pound pig to gain 100 pounds. Knowing this, it is highly critical to start with a pig that is the right age and size to gain the required weight. The early part of the feeding period is extremely important to your pig's overall gain as it has to get big quickly in order to increase its feed intake and in turn, gain more weight. The "Pork-ulator" is available at your local Extension office to assist in determining the size of pig you should purchase. Remember, it is easier to hold a pig for a few days than to make rapid impossible gain at the last minute, so consider purchasing a heavier pig to start. More correctly, 5 to 10 extra pounds on the purchase weight may mean a 25 to 30 pound bigger pig at fair time.

After you have selected the right pig it becomes your job to give it every chance to succeed. There are other critical factors that affect gain in swine. First it is important that they are comfortable. Being too cold or too hot can negatively affect feed intake and as a result, reduce gain. Provide your pig with housing that reduces cold morning drafts. Keep the feed where the pigs can get to it without having to go out in the cold on winter mornings. As days get warmer, remember that like humans, pigs can sunburn. It is important to adjust pigs to long hours of sunlight slowly. In the summer it is just as important to provide a cool area for your pigs and keep the feed in a shady area if possible. Spraying water on your pigs several times a day will help them stay cool. You can provide a mister system which will keep the area cool also.

A quality health plan including vaccination and worming are needed as well. Your veterinarian can assist you in planning your vaccination program. Many of your pigs will have been vaccinated for several diseases when you purchase them, but you need to ask the producer. Keeping your pig healthy to avoid weight loss and slow gain is extremely important to your success. You should consider worming your

pigs monthly, alternating wormers so that worms don't build up resistance to any one wormer. Worms are common to livestock fed in confined areas. When worms are allowed to grow in your pig uncontrolled, they will reduce gain and feed efficiency considerably.

Water! Water! Water! Water is the most critical nutrient to any living organism. Clean cool drinking water is an absolute necessity to your pig. Water should be near the feed so the pig can drink with its meal much the same as you do. A nipple water is a good way to get fresh clean water to your pig, however if it is on the end of a hose, be sure that the hose is covered or buried so the sun will not have the water hot when the pig is ready to drink.

Once you have purchased a pig, the feed you feed is important to your success. Feeding a balanced ration is necessary to allow the pig to gain to its potential. There are a variety of show feeds you can purchase for your pig; most of which are designed by nutritionists who have years of experience in making pigs convert feed efficiently and gain well. You should consider purchasing one of these feeds from a reputable dealer instead of attempting to design your own, unless you have an extensive knowledge of swine nutrition. Don't let poor quality feed be the reason that your pig didn't make weight.

Having a successful swine project involves a combination of many areas of livestock husbandry. Paying close attention early and often to your project pigs will allow you time to fix anything that could cause you problem and help make it a successful project year. However, letting just one of these areas fall by the wayside can be the limiting factor in your success. Be a good livestock producer and don't let that happen!