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Pork Producer Says It Plans to Give Pigs More Room

By ALEXEI BARRIONUEVO

CHICAGO, Jan. 25 — The world’s largest pork processor said on Thursday that it would phase out confinement of pigs in individual gestation crates over the next decade, a move animal welfare advocates said would end one of the cruelest practices in the agriculture industry.

The processor, Smithfield Foods, which raises sows at 187 farms in eight states, said it would replace individual metal cages with pens where the sows would be housed in groups, allowing more mobility.

Animal welfare activists praised the move. “This is perhaps the most important moment in animal welfare in the agribusiness sector in 50 years,” said Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States.

The Humane Society and others have long criticized the use of gestation crates. The sows spend up to three years continuously reproducing — much of the time confined in stalls where they cannot turn around — before being slaughtered. Veal cows are confined to two-foot-wide crates for four months and then slaughtered. Hens spend about a year laying eggs in “battery cages” — where they do not have room to flap their wings — before they are slaughtered.

But the confinement of breeding pigs to two-foot-by-seven-foot metal cages “is the most intensive and longest that any animal in agriculture is subjected to,” Mr. Pacelle said.

Animal welfare groups have successfully pressured universities and retailers like Whole Foods and Ben & Jerry’s to ban the practice of buying eggs from companies that confine hens in battery cages. But the groups have had less success in the United States in persuading meat processors to change their practices.

The European Union decided in 2001 to ban the practice by 2013. Ballot initiatives to ban the practice in Arizona and Florida have been successful, and Mr. Pacelle said animal welfare activists have planned initiatives in at least five other states.

Smithfield had been studying the issue for more than two years and decided to phase out the stalls after customers like McDonald’s began asking questions about the confinement practices, said Dennis Treacy, the company’s vice president for environmental and corporate affairs.

Smithfield has been researching penning systems at hog farms in North Carolina.

“We didn’t do this in reaction to activists’ requests, and no customer said they would take away business if we didn’t do this,” Mr. Treacy said. “We are trying to be proactive and respond to what we think the customers want.”

Smithfield has not determined how much the transition will cost. The pork industry has come under pressure because of record-high corn prices that have driven up the cost of feeding hogs by 30 percent in the last year.

“This will not overly stress our system,” Mr. Treacy said.

Smithfield, which had revenue of \$11.4 billion in 2006, raises 14 million hogs in the United States each year and processes 27 million hogs into pork products, for a 26 percent share of the market.

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