

Animal Management and Animal Welfare at the Snake River Farm PART 5

This letter is part of a series.

If you did not see the earlier letters, you can find them easily on Sarah's blog.

www.sandhillfarmsarah.wordpress.com

In this letter, I will write about Pigs.

We raise pastured pigs.

Hogs can only be pastured during the growing season.

We buy little pigs in the spring, raise them on pasture, and harvest them in late fall.

Pigs are not well suited to cold weather.

We keep no pigs in the winter.

The piglets come to our farm at the beginning of May. At that time, they are just a few weeks old.

They are females, (gilts) and castrated males (barrows).

Male pigs, (boars) develop a strong and displeasing taste.

When raised under the same conditions there is no significant difference in behavior, growth rate, weight or meat taste between gilts and barrows.

Normally the piglets are born in a confinement system. That means they have lived only in heated buildings.

When we bring them home, we carefully acclimate them to a more natural environment. They must adapt to fresh air, sunshine and cool spring temperatures. They must also adjust to our simpler basic feed. Most important, they must develop immune systems that function well without antibiotics or medication.

To do that we put them into a large shed with deep straw bedding. The shed is open on the sunny side. For the first two weeks, the pigs are together in one large group of 100 or more. Even though there are many piglets in the shed, they have much more space and more freedom than in the confinement barn. They can immediately start natural hog behaviors like rooting in the dirt. They are able to run and play. If the May weather gets too cold we enclose the open sides of the shed with tarps. Normally the pigs toughen up within a few days.

I begin training the pigs for pasture life immediately

I walk in the pen several times each day to clean and fill their feed troughs. While in the pen, I check the piglets carefully to see that all are feeling well. Walking in the pen gets the pigs accustomed to having me among them.

I pick animals that are not doing well and place them in a nursery. The nursery is simply a corner of the shed that is fenced off. The nursery has heat lamps for extra warmth. The nursery usually contains five to eight little pigs. Tending to the distressed piglets in a less competitive area improves their well being drastically. Normally, within a few days the nursery pigs can go back in with the larger group. Each day I add a couple pigs to the nursery and return a couple pigs to the main pen.

During this time, I also train them to electric fencing.

Moveable, one strand electric fences are crucial for managing hogs on pasture.

To train them I string a small diameter wire across a corner of the pen. I place a section of white ribbon wire across a different corner. These electrified strands are not needed to hold the little pigs in this pen.

The strands are for training purposes only. The piglets quickly learn to see and to avoid the electrified wires.

When I move the pigs to their summer pastures, I will use single strand wire along the permanent exterior fences. This wire keeps them from digging under perimeter fences.

I use the white ribbon wire for the moveable fences to manage grazing.

This white ribbon is the same ribbon that is commonly used for horse fencing.

I use the white tape for the moveable fence because the pigs can see it easily. Some hog farmers believe that pigs will not cross a line where there was an electric fence, even after the fence has been moved.

That is not true. They will readily move past yesterday's barrier if they are trained to regular fence movement.

I feed the pigs a special blend of grains that I grind weekly on the farm. Their diet is high in oats. Each week I adjust the ratio of the grains to supply the correct protein and nutrient level for their age, weight and pasture conditions.

I developed the high oat ration years ago so that the pigs would not grow too rapidly. Hog digestive systems are much like ours. I like oats in my diet. It is my belief that our pigs are healthier, play more and feel better on this diet.

In 2013, I developed a corn free ration. In this diet, the pig feed is a blend of oats and wheat. The hogs did perfectly well on this new diet.

By the way, I never feed the pigs meat. Some growers throw road kill or offal to their pigs. That is a cheap source of protein and the pigs love it.

I think it is a bad practice, however. Road kill carcasses may carry trichinosis. Trichinosis is the worm disease that grandmother worried about.

Worse yet, pigs quickly become ravenous about meat. It just seems like a bad idea to me.

I start moving groups of around 30 to their separate pastures within two weeks after arrival. By then they have adapted to our simpler feeds, strengthened their immune systems and toughened up for the outside world.

Each pasture has shade trees and an open sided shed that faces south. Each pasture also has its own water supply, grain feeder and electric fence charger.

I have found that hogs are most relaxed in groups of ten to thirty. More than forty and the animals do not socialize as well. In large groups smaller pigs may be picked on or fall behind.

In the wild, two to four sows form a group called a sounder. Including little pigs, those groups normally number between 15 and 25.

That group size may define both their minimum need and their maximum capability for a stable social order.

Pigs of the same age with adequate water, food and space do not form a strict hierarchy.

Each pasture is completely separate from other pig pastures. That is an important factor in disease prevention. A low stress life and a robust immune system provide good defense from illness.

I move interior fences so the animals have green plants to eat every day. The pigs will graze off the green material within a few hours. Then they pull up the roots and eat those. Last, they turn the soil repeatedly to find all manner of tasty morsels.

Digging in the soil is natural behavior for hogs. It provides good exercise and it helps them build strong, lean muscle.

The pigs revel in it.

Some growers try to prevent their hogs from rooting, because rooting and eating the roots kills plants. Instead of trying to change pig behavior, I fence off and replant the pastures up to three times each year.

I use a separate fence charger for each pasture. Pigs occasionally short an electric fencer by rolling a big lump of dirt or a tree limb onto it. When that happens, I do not want a short in one pen to affect the fence in another.

Pigs respect electric fence but they are not particularly afraid of it. Some individuals will test it frequently to make certain it is working. Occasionally, I will have a pig that is so tempted by something on the other side that it will scoot past the wire, knowing it may get a shock. When that happens, I leave the pig out. By late afternoon it will be standing, facing the fence wishing it could get back to its home and its companions. Eventually the pig will gather the courage to run the wire again to get home. It is not likely to repeat that traumatic act on the following day.

There is always a woven wire fence beyond the electric fence so that if pigs do get past the electric wire they are not really "out" just into tomorrow's breakfast.

Pigs cannot sweat.

On days over 80 degrees each pen has a water sprinkler to keep the pigs cool.

The pigs grow through the summer and by fall, they weigh hundreds of pounds. By harvest time, they will average over 400 pounds with some weighing more than 500 pounds.

I continue to walk in their pens each day but I carry a little stick. I use the stick to tap them in the snout if they nibble at my pants. Walking through a pen of curious little piglets is one thing. Walking through a pasture of 400 pound animals is something different.

My goal is to walk through the pasture, checking pigs, fixing fences or performing other tasks without being eaten. The pigs are gentle and good natured, but they are still pigs.

Harvest starts in October and all the pigs are gone before the end of December.

I transport the hogs in the stock trailer to Quality Meats, ten or twelve animals at a time.

The afternoon before loading, I back the trailer to the shed where the pigs sleep. By this time in the fall, the pigs are all sleeping in a hog pile within their shed.

I put a small light and some nice straw in the trailer. The trailer is often filled with volunteers when I come out before daylight. If not, I close the animals in their shed and crowd them as needed with moveable gates.

The pigs know me. The animals are always calmest if I work alone. That is true for cattle and bison also. I pasture harvest those beef and bison. Hogs cannot be calmly pasture harvested. At least not after the first one.

I loaded 100 pigs for harvest in 2013. I did not need to shout, shock or hit a pig even once to get them loaded.

I take the loaded trailer to Foley where Josh and I unload the pigs into the waiting area at the butcher shop. I can give more details on the actual harvest if you wish.

Last fall Gail and granddaughter Ella (six) came along to Foley on one trip. They watched Josh handle and kill a pig. They were satisfied that it was done well.

This is a good system

This is a good arrangement overall for the pigs.

The pigs live to enjoy the Minnesota growing season from end to end.

As with all our animals, we work hard to give them a good life and a stress free death.

Please ask if you have questions.

Best regards.

Tom