

# Free Range Pork Farmers Association Newsletter

June, 2008 "Good, healthy food will only be grown if we demand it"

## Farrowing - How free should it be?

There is some lively discussion lately on just what free range means. Results from the [www.pigout.net.au](http://www.pigout.net.au) survey leave no doubt that free range means pigs raised in paddocks to most people.

Unfortunately, there are those antagonists in the industry that would like to set the bar so high for free range producers that it would become almost impossible to achieve without jeopardizing the welfare of the pigs.

Australian Pork Limited has a description available on their website for free range pork that reads:

*"Free Range Pork - What is it?"*

*A descriptor of free range pork is pork derived from animals raised in Australia with adherence to humane animal practices as prescribed by the Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals (Pigs). Throughout their lives the pigs are provided continuous free access to the outdoors and shelter from the elements furnished with bedding. This term may only be used when both the growing pigs and the sows from which they have been bred have been kept under these conditions"*

Opponents of free range pork are quick to jump on the line in this description that reads:

*Throughout their lives the pigs are provided continuous free access to the outdoors.....!*

Why? Because some free range producers will bring their sows indoors, when conditions dictate, to allow them to farrow in safety and guard them from the elements and predators, and there are some that would like to say that this excludes them from being a free range producer.

When these producers do bring the sows inside, they do not enclose them in sow stalls or farrowing crates, rather, large straw filled bays with plenty of room to make a nest to give birth in and a safe, warm and secure environment for their newborns. It is labour intensive and far more expensive to provide this level of care to the sows, but every step must be taken to ensure the safety of these animals.

So then, if we are saying that there are circumstances in which pigs should be housed, why then

## Relevant Links

[Pig Out!](#)

## Free Range Pork Now Available at:

Thomas Dux Grocer  
Macro Wholefoods

shouldn't we accept the intensive industries argument that they only house all their pigs in an effort to look after the welfare of their animals?

I have no intention of covering all the practices of factory farming, but will expand on farrowing techniques. Let's look to Australian Pork Limited once again and examine a section of their document, "Suitability of Outdoor Pig Farming in Australia"

#### *Pigs as Prey*

*Pigs are naturally prey, not predators. Rearing pigs outdoors limits their protection from other animals. In particular, wild foxes, birds and feral pigs are known to attack domesticated pigs kept outdoors.*

*Foxes are one of the more difficult species to exclude through fencing as they can climb, jump, dig, and learn to overcome obstacles. As other animals are farmed outdoors some research has been conducted into developing fox resistant fences. Designing a barrier to exclude foxes is particularly challenging owing to their climbing agility, jumping and digging capability and capacity to learn how to overcome obstacles. Although electric fencing has had some success research shows that foxes will consistently try to jump fences even after shocks, and will develop strategies to breach the fence regardless. As a result, some mauling of pigs by wild foxes is to be expected.*

*Birds, in particular crows and eagles are renowned for attacking piglets, particularly pecking out their eyes, and heads and leaving them to die. Free range producers have tried many methods of preventing attack from birds, such as wires, scarecrows and radio frequency transmission, however it remains a serious issue."*

*This document is available [here](#)*

It is my own experience that apart from rare attack by wild dogs, the only time pigs are susceptible to attack by predators like foxes, feral pigs and crows, is when the sow is giving birth and the following few days. The APL document supports my own experience, indeed, foxes are a major problem for the farrowing sow and she can do nothing to stop their attack while she is in labour. They will also return during the following nights to take more of their new found prey while the sow is still recovering and not as alert as she normally would be. Crows too will attack the newborn piglets when they are at their most vulnerable, the first few days of life.

The first line of the APL description for free range reads:

*"A descriptor of free range pork is pork derived from animals raised in Australia with adherence to humane animal practices as prescribed by the Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals (Pigs)"*

Section 4.4 (Protection) of the Code of Practice requires the following standard to be met;

**4.4.3 Preventative measures must be implemented for protection of pigs from predators.**

Therefore, for reasons described in the APL document "Suitability of Outdoor Pig Farming in Australia", and that of the Code of Practice, it would be a very necessary requirement that producers take steps to protect the welfare of their sows and piglets. To allow them to farrow in conditions known to place them in jeopardy of predation would be criminal.

The organic standard is very highly regarded for its attention to animal welfare. Organic pigs are also free range pigs as access to pasture is a requirement of the standard. I have quoted here relevant sections of the National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce.

3.11.3 Livestock must be managed to ensure they range freely on pasture. All livestock must have an adequate supply of clean water.

**3.16 LIVESTOCK WELFARE**

Standards

3.16.1 The welfare of livestock is paramount and Commonwealth, State and Territory legislative requirements, including surgical treatment restrictions apply.

3.16.2 Living conditions must provide for the natural needs of the animal for free movement, including free ranging during day light hours, food, water, shelter, shade and for aquatic animals, water for swimming.

**3.17 LIVESTOCK HOUSING**

General Principles

The producer of organic or bio-dynamic livestock should provide shelter, because of:

the conditions under which the health, safety and well being of the animal could be jeopardized.

inclement weather.

the animal's stage of pregnancy.

#### Standards

3.17.1 Where housing is provided, the building construction must satisfy the biological and behavioural needs of livestock including freedom of movement and comfort as well as protection from climatic extremes and predators.

So, should a free range producer be condemned for protecting their animals? Does this mean that an organic producer can no longer call themselves free range? Are they unable to house a sick animal for fear of having their accreditation stripped from them? How well would you sleep at night if you could hear the howling of foxes knowing that you had left your sows to farrow unprotected?

A sow is never more vulnerable than when she is giving birth and her tiny new offspring are easy prey if predators are a problem. Not all pig farms will experience problems with foxes or feral pigs, but when they are known to be active in an area, every step should be taken to protect the welfare of the pigs in our care.

I would love to hear your comments on this.

#### **Industry definition for pig production methods**

Australian Pork Limited have recently informed the FRPFA that they are in the process of developing production standards for the different methods of pig farming.

The standards are to become part of the APL APIQ quality assurance program with different modules for free range, deep litter, etc.

I know we will all be keeping a close eye on how they eventually decide how to define free range production.

[APL Website](#)

<http://www.freerangeporkfarmers.com.au>

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