

The Lives of Female Pigs in the EU

Around **131 million** pigs are kept in the EU, including roughly **10M** breeding sows.¹ The majority are raised in intensive indoor systems (“factory farms”); backyard farming accounts for around **3%** of pigs.² Fewer than **100,000** sows, under **1%** of the total, are kept organically.³

Litter after Litter: Breeding of Sows in Commercial Farming

A gilt (young female pig) is first inseminated at around **6–8 months** of age. Pregnancy lasts about **115 days**.⁴

A sow is typically inseminated again within **7 days** of her piglets being weaned, meaning that the average EU sow gives birth to **2.3 litters a year**.⁵

In free-range conditions, piglets are weaned at around **13–17 weeks of age**.⁶ On commercial indoor farms, they are separated from their mothers at **3–4 weeks**, the legal minimum.

Decades of breeding for ever-larger litters means that the number of live-born piglets can exceed the number of functional teats, driving pre-weaning mortality. EFSA concludes that litter size should not exceed **12 piglets born alive**, yet the average across EU InterPIG countries is **15**.⁷ In Denmark, the average size of a litter reaches nearly **19 piglets**.⁸

Most sows are slaughtered after only a few litters, at **2–3 years old**, despite a natural lifespan of well over a decade.⁹

- 1 Eurostat, Pig Population: Annual Data (apro_mt_lspig), dataset, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/apro_mt_lspig/default/table.
- 2 M.-L. Augère-Granier, The EU Pig Meat Sector, EPRS Briefing PE 652.044 (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652044/ EPRS_ BRI\(2020\)652044_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652044/ EPRS_ BRI(2020)652044_EN.pdf).
- 3 Eurostat, Organic Livestock (org_lstspec), dataset, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/org_lstspec/default/table?lang=en&category=agr.org.
- 4 EFSA (European Food Safety Authority), “Scientific opinion on the welfare of pigs on farm,” EFSA Journal, 20(8), 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2022.7421>.
- 5 Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), 2022 Pig Cost of Production in Selected Countries (2023)
- 6 EFSA (2022).
- 7 EFSA (2022).
- 8 G. McCutcheon, InterPIG figures for 2025, Teagasc, 2026. Available at: <https://teagasc.ie/news-events/daily/interpig-figures-for-2025/>.
- 9 EFSA (2022).

The Lives of Female Pigs in the EU *continued*

No Room to Turn Around: Caged Farming of Female Pigs

In each reproductive cycle, a sow is typically confined **twice**: in a sow stall during insemination through the first four weeks of pregnancy, and in a farrowing crate from shortly before giving birth until her piglets are weaned. That amounts to around **160 days a year in a cage**.

These cages for female pigs are extremely narrow, preventing them from turning around. A conventional cage is between **0.9–1.4m²**. A sow needs **47m²** to show the full extent of locomotory behaviour.¹⁰

From Cages to Pens: The Case for Cage-Free Farrowing

Moving from farrowing crates to free farrowing in farrowing pens would carry an aggregated net policy cost of **€1.11 billion**.¹¹

This transition would deliver monetised animal welfare benefits of **€44 billion**, a return of roughly **€40 for every €1 spent**.¹²

Temporary crating – sometimes presented as an efficient compromise as it restricts the sow's movement only during a few critical days around farrowing – is also more expensive: temporary crating raises net costs more **(+€39.7 per sow per year)** than free farrowing does **(+€19.7 per sow per year)**.

10 EFSA (2022).

11 The policy scenario accounts for a ban adopted in 2028 with a 10-year transition period. 22 Member States are included in the calculation, excluding the five Member States that have adopted a ban or a partial ban on farrowing crates.

12 Using Animal Quality-Adjusted Life Years (AQALY) and applying a neuron-proportional sentence weight.

For more information on the economic and welfare analysis, see our White Paper here.