Safe Pig Handling: Weaning the Sow

National Pork Board
The sow has done her job

- She farrowed
- She nurtured
- She nursed
  - Now it is time to wean the sow, move her pigs to the next stage, and move the sow back to the gestation barn to rest, recover, and be bred back

Weaning the sow

- Can be a stressful event
  - The stall is familiar
  - Her pigs are with her
Some sows are ready to leave the stall and stop nursing, others may be attached to

• The environment
• The routine
• Nursing
• Their pigs

Can make weaning and moving sows to breeding a challenge which affects the safety of pig handlers
Daily interaction with the sow will make the weaning process easier

• When the sow is familiar and comfortable with you
  o She will not be as frightened when weaning day arrives
  o She will be easier to move
  o The process will be less stressful for the sow and you
Before you move sows

- Prepare your pathway to ensure there are no distractions or obstacles
  - Remove any tools or equipment from the hallway
  - Close any gates or doors that will not be utilized when moving animals
  - Apply a drying agent to the floors to prevent slipping which could cause injury

Prepare your path before you begin moving the sows

- Will save you time
- Will reduce stress
Two options for weaning sows

1. Remove the sow first, and the weaned piglets later
2. Remove the piglets first, with the sow still in the stall
Things to consider when weaning pigs with the sow still in the stall

1. Footing
   - Be aware of the different types of flooring
     - Wire flooring
     - Cast-iron flooring
     - Plastic flooring

   Flooring may be slippery so use caution when stepping into the stalls
2. Hand Placement
   - Be mindful of where you put your hand
   - Sow could become agitated
     - Could bite your hand or cause injury to you or other farm workers

3. Obstacles
   - Watch for obstacles in your way when weaning pigs
   - Move heat lamps out of the way

Learn your farm’s weaning protocol
Things to consider when moving sows out of farrowing stalls

• Sows may turn and start to walk the opposite way
• Sows may jump over the stall dividers
Safety issue for the animal and for the handlers

• Never move without plenty of sort boards
• Never move sows alone
  o Two people that stay in the room at all times
  o One person outside to keep the sows moving in the right direction
Jumper sows

- A serious safety hazard
  - Example: This sow spooked and jumped
    - Handlers worked together with their sort boards to move the sow out of the farrowing room
Sort board

- Creates a physical barrier between the sow and you as she exits her farrowing stall
- Provides protection for your body if the sow becomes aggressive or agitated
- Obstructs the sow’s view of the aisle beyond her stall
- Assists in turning the sow in the right direction, moves her down the aisle and into the hallway
Good example of sort board use

- The sort board is placed inside the stall
  - The handler taps the sow
  - Keeps the sort board moving along with her head when she comes out of stall
    - Provides a barrier of protection between the handler and the sow
  - Uses front of stall as a barrier to turn her the right direction
Use a sort board whenever possible

• Realize there are some situations where use of the sort board may not be realistic
  
  o In narrow alleys, use good judgment and gauge the sow’s temperament
  
  o If a sow or gilt seems agitated do not put yourself in harm’s way
  
  o If the sow is calm and moving steadily you may continue to gently encourage her to her destination
When allowing sows to pass you in a narrow alley

- Step into a nearby empty stall and wait
- If the space does not allow this, step to the side of the walkway, bend your knees slightly and remain still until she is safely by
Never attempt to move sows alone

- Some sows may become agitated and try to return to or search for their missing piglets
- This could create a dangerous situation for handlers
- Have more than one person present to help
  - If a handler slips and falls
  - If a handler is injured by a sow
  - If a sow jumps a pen divider
Sows will want to explore their surroundings

- The change in flooring
- The stalls and neighbors

Only move a few sows at a time to prevent overcrowding in the aisle
As you move sows

- Be calm
- Be prepared

Moving sows too fast, or forgetting their strong desire to get back to their pigs can make moving difficult and risky
The hallway

- Should already be prepped, cleaned and dried
  - Wetness or feces could cause the sow or you to slip
When obstacles are not removed

- Example: gallon jug and feed scoop
  - Sows may balk
  - Sows may spook
  - Sows could spill contents of the jug
  - Sows could turn around and try to re-enter the farrowing room
    - These responses may cause a bottleneck for other sows coming down the hallway

Remove the obstacles from the hallway to prevent further problems
Sows are cautious and may move slowly

- Be patient
- Let the sows go at their own pace
- Use light pressure to encourage forward movement
  - Too much pressure could cause sows to freeze or back up
  - Slow and steady movement is best
The hallway to the gestation barn

- Older parity sows will move more easily than younger parity sows
  - They are more familiar with the process
  - They are more comfortable entering the gestation stalls without hesitation
  - They will be helpful in leading the younger sows

- The handler should
  - Remain patient
  - Don’t apply too much pressure to young sows
    - They will enter their stalls when they are ready
If the lead sow balks or stops

- The rest of the sows aren’t going to want to move
  - Older parity sows know the routine and are better suited to lead the way
  - Younger parity sows are more likely to stop, look around and be curious before they want to continue on
Pay close attention to other people in the gestation barn when moving sows

• Work calmly and slowly (especially when coworkers are nearby)
  - A startled sow could potentially injure your coworkers by
    - Running into them
    - Knocking them down
    - Trampling them

Stay calm and be patient to make sure all animals and people stay safe
Pushing sows too fast could cause an injury to the employee working in front of you.

Have patience and use extra care when moving animals around other employees.
Be aware of your surroundings and the sow you are moving

- The sow could try to back out of her stall while you are standing behind her
- She could knock an unlatched gate into your legs or step on your feet
- She could pinch your hand or arm between her body and the gate
Proper preparation will always pay off

• Clearing hallways and paths
  o Will result in fewer distractions and more efficient movement

• Carrying sort boards
  o Will increase the safety for the sows and handlers

• Staying calm and patient
  o Will keep the experience positive for you and the sows
Smart handling is safe handling