Split suckle for survival

Farm facts
Name: Tomos Lloyd, Hartpury College Pig Unit
Location: Gloucester
Farm size and enterprise: 60 sows, batch farrow to finish

Background
The unit farrows eight sows on a three-week batch system. With litter size averaging 13.33 born alive there are not many spare teats at farrowing! To ensure piglets get off to a good start by consuming plenty of colostrum the litters are split suckled until spare places can be found.

The system
Once sows have finished cleansing, large litters (13 or more piglets) are split suckled. To ensure minimal transfer of disease between farrowing crates, all footwear is disinfected using the clean foot dips placed in every farrowing room. The original process was for the biggest piglets to be removed from the sow and be placed into the sealed creep area at the front of the crate.

The suckling pattern during the day was as follows:
- Small piglets one hour, larger piglets one hour
- Small piglets two hours, larger piglets one hour.

All the piglets were released overnight. An added benefit of practising split suckling was that it had trained the piglets to lie in the creep area. To reduce both the time input by staff and stress on the piglets, the split suckling process was modified to remove only the largest piglets, leaving the smallest piglets permanently with the sow; there has been no difference in mortality with this modification.

Benefits
- Piglets receive a good intake of colostrum
- Mortality is reduced
- Good for staff morale.

Key to success
- Motivation to reduce piglet mortality
- Ensuring co-workers understand the importance of colostrum intake
- Having adjustable lids on the creeps to allow air to circulate and prevent piglets from becoming too warm
- Having everything prepared and within reach.

Further reading
Action for Productivity 17: Colostrum – food for life
Work Instruction 16: Split suckling
Farm Case Study 1: Nurtinger intensive rearing system

“I also use split suckling when there is large variation in birth weights as it allows the lighter piglets to have better access to the teats”; this is more likely to occur with older parity sows.

Split suckling takes Tom about 10 minutes per suckling shift to sort out the litters. He can continue with this technique for up to three days or until the whole batch has farrowed, when he will then foster off using the transition feeder and Nurtinger accommodation.

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