



## **Monitoring progress in the phasing out of pig castration in the Netherlands and elsewhere November 2009**

**Background:** Back in April 2008, the Dutch animal welfare organisation *Varkens in Nood* (*Pigs in Peril*) threatened several large supermarket chains in The Netherlands with prosecution for causing unnecessary animal suffering. These supermarket chains were purchasing their pig meat from suppliers that castrated all their males despite there being new scientific evidence that this cruel procedure was no longer justified. New scientific research showed that boar taint is only present in a very small percentage of all boars and that many consumers do not mind or do not even detect the smell. Furthermore, some smaller Dutch supermarket chains were already busy selling fresh boar meat using a simple sniff-test to ensure that it wasn't stinky, and they had not experienced any problems or customer complaints.

Numerous supermarkets and meat distributors in The Netherlands, as well as a major German slaughterhouse that supplies many Dutch supermarkets, responded to the threatening campaign by agreeing to phase out pig castration. Since then, Eyes on Animals has been involved in the discussions around this topic and monitoring the progress by regularly visiting slaughterhouses and pig farms moving in this direction.

### **Scientific literature:**

- G.B.C. Backus "Beren of de Weg" Wageningen UR, March 2008.
- CCL Nutricontrol, "Sensorische beoordeling van spekmonsters op beren geur", Veghel, October 2007
- Bee, Giuseppe & Patrizia Piccinali, "Beliebtheit von Eberfleisch bei Schweizer Konsumenten" Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, August 2006.

**Previous reports:** Eyes on Animals has previously written two reports on the phasing out of pig castration with information directly from the field. One was published in November 2008 and the other in March 2009. This current report takes off since our last report, covering any recent developments since March 2009.

Copies of EonA earlier reports can be requested by contacting [info@eyesonanimals.com](mailto:info@eyesonanimals.com)



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## **Slaughterhouse update**

### **Westfort slaughterhouse in Gorinchem, Netherlands**



During our last visit in March 2009, this slaughterhouse (the first one to use professional sniffers to detect boar taint) was slaughtering 4000 boars per week. Now they are up to 5000 boars per week.

They still have the same rate of boar taint incidences as earlier- 97% of the boar carcasses do not have any taint at all, 3% of the boar carcasses have some odour of boar taint but only 1,5% are truly stinky. Their professional sniffers heat up a small piece of fat in the shoulder area of

each boar carcass, and those that release even the slightest amount of boar taint are identified by tying a red ribbon around it. These carcasses are then separated and used for pre-cooked products such as sausages and cold cuts etc...

Jaap de Wit, the owner of the plant, has not received any complaints since the beginning of his switch over to boars from any of his customers. He is very satisfied with the quality of his boar meat and reports that things are going very well.

Back in March he was hoping to find a market for the boar testicles in Asia, but unfortunately has not had any luck so far.

### **Tönnies slaughterhouse**

Tönnies's plant in Rheda Wiedenbruck is now slaughtering between 5000 and 7000 boars per week! Their other two plants, in Weissenfeld and Sögel have now also started slaughtering boars, 500 and 1000 per week respectively. These two plants are having an easier time because the pig farms in the east part of the country are much larger, thus once one farm has stopped with castration they have immediately a bigger source of boars.

The boars they slaughter range from 6-7 months of age.

Tönnies slaughterhouse in Rheda-Wiedenbruck just has one major challenge- finding the time to convince more farmers to stop with castration and supply them with boars. They are trying to convince more pig farmers to stop castration, but unfortunately this topic has become highly political in Germany and there are competitors from the pork industry that are against what Tönnies is doing- some are even trying to put forth rules that would require labels on boar meat packages warning customers that the meat could stink! This has made some farmers nervous, wondering if the demand for boar meat could end abruptly and leave them with boars that no one will accept.



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At the moment they are still using professional “sniffers” to detect boar taint. They are perfectly satisfied with this method. They have been delivering boar meat since August 2009 to their Dutch client, Groothedde, which distributes to several major Dutch supermarkets and restaurants. Groothedde and its clients have not made, or had, any complaints since then.

Tönnies says that when the electronic nose (see previous report for details) is available they will still install it at their plant, to give their clients that extra reassurance that all boar taint is detected and to make detection standardized. However, they are not dependant on it for continuing their production of boar meat.

If they were to receive more demands for boar meat, they could supply it. They are more than willing to double, even quadruple their supply of boar meat if there was a demand (up to 20,000 a day if necessary). It is important to keep in mind however that fattening pigs need 6 months to reach slaughter-weight, thus there is a period of 6 months between convincing a farmer to stop castrating and his ability to deliver “intact” boars.

Their figures of boar taint are still the same as they reported back in March to Eyes on Animals; 95-96% of its boars do not emit any boar-taint at all. There has not yet been a single case of a boar emitting strong boar-taint at their plant. The small remaining percent of boars have emitted light to medium levels of boar-taint. They are separated and used in pre-cooked products.

Toennies plans to stop completely with the slaughtering of castrated male pigs within 3 years. This would apply to their whole production line, not just for their Dutch customers.

### **Two more German slaughterhouses are in the midst of transferring over to slaughtering boars:**

#### **1. Böselers Goldschmaus in Garrel (Germany) (contact Dr. Otto Gerald).**

- has just recently started accepting boars and are conducting tests on meat quality. They are in their early phases and results are not yet available for the public.

#### **2. Qualitaetsfleisch von Niederrhein in Geldern (Germany) (contact Heinrich Manten)**

- has recently started accepting boars and are conducting initial tests.



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## **Wholesalers, supermarkets and restaurants in the Netherlands that have stopped selling meat from castrated male pigs**

According to Varkens in Nood (the Dutch pig welfare organization (Pigs in Peril), 1/3 of the total consumption of meat coming from male pigs in the Netherlands is now from intact boars. This represents roughly 700,000 pigs per year!

They have supplied us with this list of companies that have stopped marketing meat from castrated male pigs:

### **Wholesale distributors:**

Groothedde (wholesale distributor of meat to various major Dutch supermarkets and also the Dutch partner of Toennies)- since August 2009.

Van Loon (wholesale distributor of meat for Lidl supermarket in the Netherlands) – since early 2009.

### **Supermarkets:**

COOP (has already been doing since 2007 without any problems)

SUPER DE BOER - since August 2009

ALDI (NL) - since August 2009

LIDL (NL) - since August 2009

PLUS (NL) - since August 2009

JUMBO – since very recently (exact date not known)

### **Restaurants:**

McDonalds – since 2007

HEMA – exact date not known

Center Parcs – since August 2009

Laplace – since 2008

### **Butcher chains:**

Keurslager – since May 2007

In Germany we have heard that McDonalds is making plans to phase out their meat from castrated male pigs and start using boar meat as of 2010.

In Belgium McDonalds has already stopped selling pig meat from castrated male pigs.



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## **Opinion of farmers having made the switch**



Eyes on Animals re-visited one pig farm that we had already visited back in February 2009 to see how things were going with his boars, as well as a new pig farm that also does not castrate the male piglets.

Both reported very positive results. They were saving money on feed costs (8 – 16 euro per pig!), their boars were growing well and were sturdy and healthy, they were no longer obliged to perform castration. However they did inform us that a small number of other pig farmers that stopped with castration were concerned that their intact males were fighting a lot. The “Animal Sciences Group”, a group of Dutch scientists who conduct research and experiments for the government and businesses, is now conducting studies to try to identify if this is indeed a problem among intact boars of such a young age (6-7 months) and also identify what the important factor is, as only some farms are reporting this aggressive behaviour.

The pig farmers we met do not have problems with aggression at their farm, thus they think it could be linked to differences in management or feed. Both farms were using environmental enrichment (at the one the boars had access to straw and the other to balls hanging down on chains), thus such enrichment may also limit any unwanted aversive behaviour. Perhaps their feed is satisfying all the requirements of the boar, leaving them “peaceful” with each other?

## **Conclusion**

Eyes on Animals is very impressed with the steps made by the numerous pig slaughterhouses, producers and retailers that have stopped castration or are phasing it out. As an animal welfare organization whose sole interest and objective is that animals be spared from as much fright and pain as possible, Eyes on Animals congratulate these pioneers in the movement. We also congratulate *Varkens in Nood* for getting the ball rolling and keeping the legal pressure on so that more and more industry players stop pig castration.

We are very disappointed that Vion, the Netherlands’ largest and most important pig slaughterhouse (also playing a huge international role as representative of the Dutch pig industry) has still not budged on this issue. The same goes for the two major Dutch supermarket chains, Albert Heijn and C1000, which are large clients of Vion. If Toennies slaughterhouse in Germany (the 7<sup>th</sup> largest pig slaughterhouse in the world) is able to make



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the switch, there is no reason why Vion cannot. And now that Toennies is able to produce more boar meat for potential new customers, than we urge Albert Heijn and C1000 to switch over to getting their meat from them. Albert Heijn and C1000 have a choice, they can no longer hide behind the excuse that they are not able to find a source for enough uncastrated pig meat to stock their supermarket shelves.

Our research in the field has shown us that castration is no longer necessary as a) boar taint is far less common than previously thought and b) that methods for detecting boar taint at the slaughterhouses are already in practice and are successful. There are also economic benefits to the industry, namely c) no costs to cover the castration procedure (man-power, equipment, medicine) d) better feed conversion of intact males.

Eyes on Animals strongly recommends that the remaining pig slaughterhouses, supermarkets and producers in The Netherlands quickly follow suit, so as not to trail behind a society that is consistently demanding higher animal welfare standards. We also encourage other countries producing pork to take on this opportunity before also being criticized by society.

There is no excuse for not taking action, the ending of pig castration is economically and logistically possible, and morally necessary. The switch over could be much faster and the hurdles easier to smoothen if more industry and retailers participated, instead of dragging behind or even fighting against this switch.