



Eyes on  
Animals

Watching  
out for their  
welfare

Update: phasing out of pig castration in NL-10.03.2009

# Monitoring progress in the phasing out of pig castration in the Netherlands





**Background:** Back in April 2008, the Dutch animal welfare organisation *Varkens in Nood* threatened several large supermarket chains in The Netherlands to take them to court for causing unnecessary animal suffering. They were only purchasing their pig meat from suppliers that castrated all their males despite there being new scientific evidence that this cruel procedure was perhaps no longer justified. New scientific research showed that boar taint is only present in a very tiny 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.

In addition to this legal threat, various other Dutch animal-welfare campaign groups were raising awareness among consumers about the pain involved in pig castration. Numerous supermarkets and meat distributors in The Netherlands, as well as a major German slaughterhouse that supplies many Dutch supermarkets, responded to this pressure 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.

**The concern at the time:** Boars (intact male swine) can produce an odour, considered aversive in many cultures, called boar taint. The smell is released when the fresh meat is cooked. This is the reason castration was made "obligatory" in most (but not all) pig producing countries. The supermarkets, slaughterhouses and pig producers were very concerned about "boar tainted meat" getting out onto the supermarket shelves, resulting in losing customers and perhaps their entire business.

However, animal welfare concerns of the customers, together with the fact that even producers do not enjoy castrating their animals, and the economic benefits of raising intact males (better feed conversion) were enough to convince them to take on this challenge and eventually phase it out completely.

**The hope:** There was a general feeling that perhaps the risk of boar taint had been exaggerated, and it was actually not such an unmanageable problem. England does not castrate its boars, but slaughtered their pigs at a lower weight- perhaps this would help? There had also been some reports published stating that the rate of boars emitting this smell was as low as 1-2%.

And most promising was that by heating boar tainted meat and working it into pre-cooked products such as sausages and cold-cuts, the boar taint smell completely disappears. As there was and always will be a demand for such "pre-cooked" pork products, there would always be a use even for boar-tainted meat. Thus there would be no economic damage.

**What was needed:** A system to detect boar taint at the slaughterhouse, so that those boars producing boar taint could be detected and treated accordingly.



## Actions taken by industry parties to end castration

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

This slaughterhouse was the first significant plant to start accepting boars (intact male pigs) on a large scale. Westfort currently is slaughtering 4000 boars per week.



To ensure that boar tainted meat is not accidentally shipped out to supermarkets, all boar carcasses are first tested by professional “sniffers” in the slaughterhouse. As Eyes on Animals inspectors observed first hand, this is a rather simple and effective procedure:



Professional “sniffers” heat a small area of each boar carcass (in a fatty area)...



...and smell it to detect for boar taint.

The director of the slaughterhouse informed Eyes on Animals inspectors that 97% of the 4000 boars they slaughter per week do not emit any boar-taint odour at all. The remaining 3% emit an odour that could be detected by certain people, depending on their sensitivity (some people would detect the odour, others not at all). The director estimates that only 1-1.5% are real stinkers, emitting an odour that most people would detect.



### **Tönnies slaughterhouse in Rheda-Wiedenbruck**

Tönnies is a very large plant, slaughtering approximately 20,000 pigs per day, approximately the half of that number being male pigs. It is also the first German plant, and the first slaughterhouse of its grand size, to take on the challenge of accommodating intact boars at their plant in order to supply their Dutch partner, Grootheede. Grootheede is a major distributor of meat products to numerous large supermarket chains and restaurants in The Netherlands.

They have invested money and time into the development of an “electronic nose” that can detect boar taint in a few milliseconds. All boars will pass through this “electronic nose”, and ones emitting even the slightest odor will be separated and their meat worked accordingly.

As the electronic nose will not be ready for industrial use (a prototype is already complete) until early 2011, Toennies is in the meantime slowly accepting more and more boars and having their meat thoroughly tested by professional “sniffers”, like at the Westfort plant.



By August 2009 no more pork products from Töennies will reach Dutch supermarket shelves that come from pig farms that perform castration. On the left is a photo of one of the many Dutch and German farms that have already stopped with castration and are supplying the slaughterhouse with boars.

Currently Tönnies reports 95-96% of its boars not emitting 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 not concerned about the figures at all, as boar meat, even when tainted, can be worked into pre-cooked products. Via the cooking, the taint disappears and is no longer detectable by consumers. Pre-cooked products such as ham, sausages and salami are always in demand, thus there is no loss in value even of boar- tainted meat. It just needs to be worked into specific products.



### **Pig producers**

Since November 2008, Eyes on Animals visited two pig farms that have stopped castrating their males, one in Holland that supplies Westfort slaughterhouse and one in Germany that supplies Toennies slaughterhouse. Both producers reported very positive news:

1. The boars have a better feed conversion ratio, and thus feed is costing them less than previously.
2. The boars are more active than castrated males, they play and explore much more frequently. This may lead to a better quality meat- more muscle, less fat, and a better quality of life (play behaviour and seeking behaviour are indicators of good welfare).
3. Both producers confirm that the rate of aggression among the males has not gone up; they do not have incidences of serious fighting. Although they are males, by the time they reach slaughter weight, they are still very young and have not reached puberty.
4. They both are relieved that they no longer have to perform castration: “It was a job that no one on the farm wanted to do...it is not a pleasant task at all to castrate your piglets”.
5. They believe that there may be a lower rate of infection among intact males, because the piglets have one less open wound in which bacteria can enter.





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### **Supermarkets**

In the Netherlands, a number of large supermarkets, restaurants (or retailers with restaurants in them) and butchers have confirmed that they will stop selling meat from male pigs that have undergone the stressful procedure of castration.

Varkens in Nood has supplied us with this list:

COOP (has already been doing so for the past 1.5 years, without any problems)

SUPER DE BOER

ALDI (NL)

LIDL (NL)

PLUS (NL)

McDonalds

HEMA

Centerparcs

La Place

Deen (has also already been doing so for the past 1.5 years, without any problems)

Keurslager

### **Conclusion**

Eyes on Animals is very impressed with the steps made by Westfort and Toennies slaughterhouse and the numerous pig producers and retailers that are phasing out castration completely. 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 forcing the industry to get out of a bad old habit.

Castration without anaesthetics causes both physical and psychological suffering. Castration with anaesthetics had good intentions, but still causes psychological pain (fright) as the piglets have to be handled, picked up and, under some systems, inhale aversive CO<sub>2</sub>.

Additionally, it appears that there are other long term benefits to pig welfare when leaving them intact: uncastrated male pigs “enjoy” life more, they exhibit seek and play behaviour more frequently, two important behavioural indicators for good welfare. There may also be a health benefit leaving male pigs intact; with one less open wound, they are likely less prone to bacterial infection.

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 (to the point that even one of the world’s largest slaughterhouse is switching over!).

There are also economic benefits to the industry, namely a) no costs to cover the castration procedure (man-power, equipment, medicine) b) better feed conversion in intact male c) possible market for boar testicles.

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



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is consistently demanding higher animal welfare standards. We also encourage other countries producing pork to take the Netherlands and Toennies slaughterhouse in Germany as

an example of how they too can improve the welfare of the pigs in their country by also phasing out castration. There is no justification to wait, this switch is now possible.