

# Animal welfare activists target pig castration

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An animal welfare coalition is trying to end the practice of castrating male piglets by asking grocery stores in Canada to carry pork from intact pigs.

"We politely ask you to take action and meet with your suppliers to discuss our request," said the group in an open letter to Canadian grocers. "Grocers create demand for meat from castrated pigs or, alternatively, create demand for meat from intact male pigs."

The request has drawn a sharp reaction from pork producers.

"Their end goal is to stop people from eating meat," said Karl Kynoch, Manitoba Pork Council chairman. "A lot of time they make comment on issues they don't understand, they don't have any background on."

Castrating male piglets is a standard industry practice to prevent boar taint in pork. It is usually done without anesthetic.

The Canadian industry code of practice for swine production says intact male pigs "are normally not accepted at slaughterhouses." It recommends castrating male piglets within two weeks of birth "using acceptable procedures." It does not say what those procedures are.

Many producers castrate pigs within only a few days of birth for easier handling, said Robyn Harte, a Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives swine specialist.

## Cruel and unnecessary

The 10-member group headed by the Canadian Coalition for

Farm Animals calls castration a "cruel and unnecessary practice" which is on its way out in Europe.

Stephanie Brown, a CCFA director, said grocery chains in the Netherlands are starting to sell pork from intact males without getting customer complaints about boar taint in the meat.

Boar taint is an offensive odour or taste from cooked pork derived from male pigs whose testicles have not been removed. It is caused by the accumulation of two compounds, androstenone and skatole, in the meat. Pigs naturally produce these compounds as they mature sexually.

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— ROBYN HARTE, MAFRI

Brown claimed research in Europe shows boar taint is much less common than previously believed and is usually more prevalent in older animals, not younger ones.

In an interview, Brown said she got the idea for an anti-castration campaign last fall after touring slaughter plants in the Netherlands which process intact male pigs.

The campaign is out to change the market in Canada, she said.

"It's up to grocers to say, we don't think pig meat needs to be from castrated animals," she said.

"If the market is going to change, then the slaughter plants have to do things slightly differently."

Harte disputed Brown's claim that Europe is eliminating castration, saying it's still a standard practice in most European countries. "As long as it's done humanely, it's a recognized common practice in most of the world."

## Different pigs

The reason why boar taint may not be as big an issue in Europe may have to do with the kind of pigs used, said Harte. For example, Landrace pigs in Europe may not be from the same strain as Landrace pigs in Canada. So it's possible that intact males in Europe might not provide as much boar taint as their Canadian cousins, she said.

Switching to non-castrated pigs would be impractical for processors, even if there were a market for the product, said Harte.

"You'd have to have a whole different stream for your boars. You'd also have to have a slaughter facility that could be retooled for boars."

Gary Stordy, a Canadian Pork Council spokesperson, said the information in the coalition's letter is "not necessarily 100 per cent accurate," especially the claim that boar taint is not as common as believed.

But CPC has asked the National Farm Animal Care Council to revise the pig industry code of practice to deal with such concerns, he said.

"This particular issue and a number of other ones will be reviewed and developed through scientific information and methodology rather than through activist efforts or producer intervention," said Stordy.

The code of practice for pigs was last updated in 1993.

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