



Higher welfare labelling for pig meat

A summary of findings from the project Regulating Food Labels: The case of free range food products in Australia

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Summary

- ‘Sow stall free’ has become the dominant higher welfare standard for pig meat in Australia, after Coles decided to phase out sow stalls for all own brand pork products and the Australian pork industry then introduced a voluntary industry phase out
- The ‘sow stall free’ production system provides some welfare benefits for sows, who are no longer confined in sow stalls for the majority of their pregnancies. However, sows still experience two other systems of confinement during the breeding cycle – mating stalls and farrowing crates
- The piglets that are actually consumed experience few welfare benefits from the ‘sow stall free’ production system
- Only a small proportion of pigs (around 5%) are raised in free range production systems in Australia and there are economic and environmental constraints to significantly scaling up free range pig production
- The potential for transformative change in pig welfare would require significant changes to production systems and consumers would likely need to accept a reduction in pig meat consumption and higher prices

About the project

The project “Regulating food labels: The case of free range food products in Australia” investigated the regulation of free range and other higher animal welfare labelling in Australia for eggs, chicken meat and pig meat. The project was led by Professor Christine Parker of Melbourne Law School in collaboration with Dr Gyorgy Scrinis and Dr Rachel Carey of the Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Melbourne. The project was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project DP150102168.

The project “backwards mapped”¹ claims on higher animal welfare labels, such as “free range”, making visible the production system behind the label and the networks of organisations (government, industry and civil society) involved in creating and supporting the claims on the label. The project critically examined to what extent higher welfare labels for eggs, chicken meat and pig meat lead to higher standards of animal welfare. The project involved product surveys of higher animal welfare products in stores, analysis of policy documents and interviews and workshops with key stakeholders.

The welfare of pigs

Pigs experience some of the most intensive production systems of all farmed animals. Around 90% of pigs in Australia are raised in intensive indoor production systems. Some of the main welfare concerns for the piglets (that are consumed) include procedures such as tail docking (carried out to prevent tail biting), teeth clipping (carried out to prevent injuries to other piglets and sows) and castration (which reduces boar taint and improves meat quality). However, the primary focus of public concern about the welfare of pigs is the confinement of sows (mother pigs).²

Sows in intensive indoor production systems are housed during the breeding cycle in three different types of confinement - mating stalls, sow stalls and farrowing crates (see ‘What’s the production system behind the label?’ below). These systems of confinement are just big enough to house a sow, but severely restrict their movement and their ability to perform natural behaviours, such as nest building and foraging for food. Sows in these housing systems can experience lameness and reduced bone strength, and often exhibit stereotypical behaviours that are signs of poor welfare, such as bar biting and rubbing on pen surfaces.³

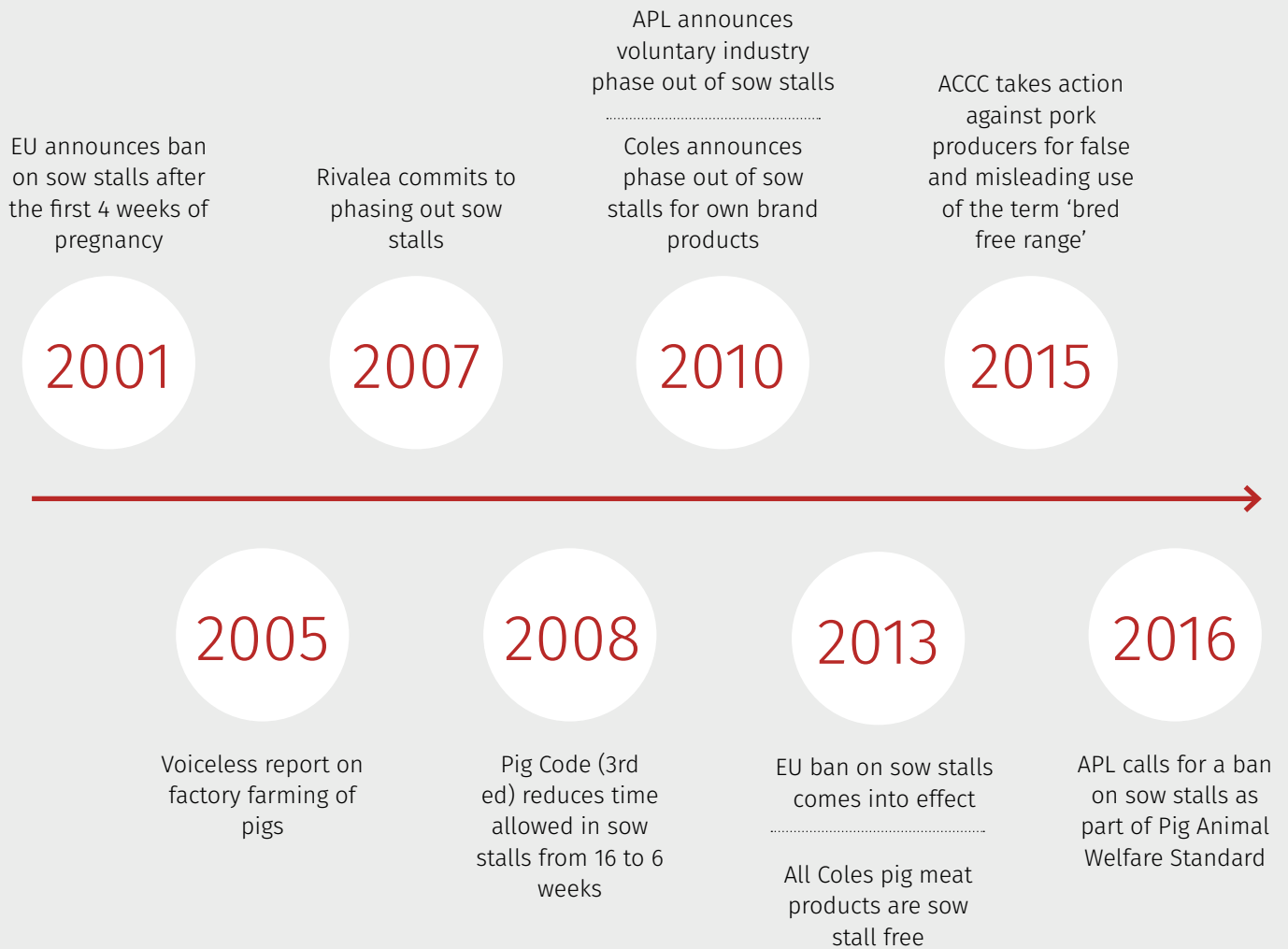
Policy and regulatory developments in pig welfare

Since the 1990s, pressure has increased to free sows from sow stalls, driven particularly by the campaigns of animal welfare groups, such as the RSPCA and Voiceless. The EU introduced a ‘partial’ sow stall ban (after the first four weeks of a sow’s pregnancy) in 2013⁴ (see figure 1), and a number of other countries have since introduced regulation to ban sow stalls including Canada and New Zealand.

Australia has not yet moved to ban sow stalls. Instead, a range of higher welfare labels has emerged for pig meat – ‘sow stall free’ (gestation stall free), ‘outdoor bred’ (previously ‘bred free range’) and ‘free range’. In 2010, the supermarket chain Coles announced that it would phase out the use of sow stalls for own brand fresh pork products, citing consumer concerns. Shortly afterwards, Australian Pork Ltd (APL) announced a voluntary industry phase out of sow stalls.

In 2015, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission took action against a number of pork producers for false and misleading use of the term ‘bred free range’, and this term has since been replaced by the label ‘outdoor bred, raised indoors on straw’. By 2016, around 75-80% of the Australian sow herd was ‘sow stall free’ and APL called for a national ban on sow stalls as part of the development of Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Pigs.⁵

Figure 1 Key developments in the governance of sow stalls 2001 – 2016



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Higher welfare labels for pig meat

There are three types of higher welfare pig meat in Australian supermarkets:

- ‘Sow stall free’ (accredited under the industry APIQ gestation-stall free certification) which is around 75-80% of the market (see figure 2).
- ‘Outdoor bred, raised indoors on straw’ (accredited under the APIQ ‘outdoor bred’ certification), which is around 5% of the market (see figure 3) and
- ‘Free range’ (accredited under multiple certification schemes including RSPCA Approved and APIQ ‘free range’), which is around 5% of the market (see figure 4)

Pork from smaller scale free range pig producers is also available at farmers markets and in smaller independent supermarkets. This pork may be accredited under the APIQ free range, RSPCA Approved or Humane Choice certification schemes.

What’s the production system behind the label?

Pork labelled **‘sow stall free’** comes from piglets which have been raised indoors in group pens, sometimes on straw or other bedding (see table 1). Sows in this production system are kept in mating stalls for between one and five days (one day for Coles own brand sow stall free pork and up to five days for Woolworths own brand pork) before being moved to group pens. Around a week before they give birth, sows are moved to a farrowing crate, where they remain until the piglets are weaned at around 3-4 weeks.

Pork labelled **‘outdoor bred, raised indoors on straw’** comes from piglets which have been raised indoors on straw in barns or eco-huts. The sows and boars live outside and are essentially ‘free range’. The piglets are born outside, but are moved indoors once they are weaned.

Pork labelled **‘free range’** comes from piglets that live outdoors in paddocks with access to huts for shelter and areas where they can express natural behaviours, such as wallowing and rooting and foraging for food. This is the only production system in which both piglets and breeding pigs live their entire lives outside.



Figure 2 Coles sow stall free bacon







Figure 3 Outdoor bred (raised indoors on straw) ham



Figure 4 Woolworths free range pig meat

Table 1 Summary of major voluntary accreditation standards for higher welfare pig meat in Australia

Claim/Logo	Accreditation body	Mostly sold where?	Producers/Brands	Production System
Coles Sow Stall Free 	APIQ CSC – retailer-specific certification scheme operated by Australian Pork Ltd (APL), the major industry body	Coles, one of Australia’s two major retailers*	Coles own brand ‘conventional’ pork products	Conventional indoor production system. Sows can only be kept in a mating stall for up to 24 hours. Piglets cannot routinely be castrated, have their tails docked or teeth trimmed.
Other sow stall free (with no label claim)	APIQ – sow stall free certification scheme operated by APL	Woolworths, one of Australia’s two major retailers*, small independent retailers	Woolworths own brand ‘conventional’ pork products	Conventional indoor production system. Sows can only be kept in a mating stall for up to 5 days.
Outdoor bred, raised indoors on straw (Previously known as ‘Bred free range’) 	APIQ outdoor bred certification scheme, operated by APL	Woolworths, Coles and IGA**	Otway Pork KR Castlemaine San Marino	Sows are free range. Piglets live outdoors until they are weaned at around 4 weeks, and are then raised indoors in group housing or in ‘ecoselters’ on straw.
RSPCA Approved (Free Range) *** 	RSPCA – highly respected animal welfare agency	Coles	Coles Finest own brand free range (fresh) pork products	Both sows and piglets are free range throughout their lives. Sow stalls and farrowing crates are prohibited.
Australian Pork Certified Free Range 	APIQ free range - certification scheme operated by APL	Woolworths and Coles, some specialist producers	Woolworths Macro own brand free range (fresh) pork products, Gamze Smokehouse	Both sows and piglets are free range throughout their lives. Sow stalls and farrowing crates are prohibited.
Other free range	Often not accredited May be accredited by Humane Choice or APIQ Free Range	Farmers markets, small independent retailers	Small scale and micro producers Yarra Valley Free Range, Skara artisanal small goods, Greenvale Farm, Bundarra Berkshire	Smaller scale free range systems. Sows and piglets are free range throughout their lives.

* Coles and Woolworths are by far the dominant supermarkets in Australia. Aldi is a relatively recent entrant to the Australian retail market, but is gaining market share. The Aldi stores surveyed for this research did not have any pigmeat products displaying labels with higher welfare claims.

** IGA is a network of independently owned retail stores. Stores are typically smaller than those of the major retailers

*** RSPCA Approved accreditation may also appear on products from pigs raised in the ‘Outdoor bred, raised indoors on straw’ production system, but in our product survey it was only seen on free range products in the Coles Finest range.

Does higher welfare labelling lead to improved welfare for pigs?

Higher welfare labelling has led to some improvements in pig welfare in Australia. Up to 80% of Australia's sow herd is now free of sow stalls for the majority of their pregnancies (of around 16 weeks), and this is an important welfare benefit. However, sows are still subject to two other forms of confinement during the breeding cycle, of which many consumers are unaware: mating stalls and farrowing crates. Sows in this intensive production system also live their lives indoors without opportunities to perform natural behaviours, such as nesting, wallowing and rooting for food. Only a small proportion of sows in Australia (around 10%) live their lives under free range conditions.

The majority of the welfare benefits gained through pig welfare labelling in Australia are experienced by breeding pigs (particularly sows), rather than the piglets that are consumed. Only a small proportion of piglets are raised under free range conditions in Australia. Piglets experience modest benefits under 'sow stall free' and 'bred free range (raised indoors on straw)' accreditation systems. Coles has a bespoke set of APIQ-administered 'sow stall free' standards that prohibit surgical castration, teeth clipping and tail docking of piglets. These procedures are also prohibited under the RSPCA Approved standards which include indoor, outdoor (such as 'free range') and combination production systems (such as 'outdoor bred').

What policy and regulatory developments could further improve pig welfare?

There is potential for all sows in Australia to be removed from sow stalls through the development of new Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Pigs (see 'Policy and regulatory developments in pig welfare' above). A better opportunity for ongoing welfare improvements might be provided by the Productivity Commission's 2016 recommendation for an independent office of animal welfare to create, monitor and enforce animal welfare standards. While the ACCC has taken action against misleading and deceptive animal welfare labels, a more proactive approach to developing national standards for higher welfare terms such as 'sow stall free', 'free range' and 'outdoor bred' could also help to reduce consumer confusion and improve animal welfare.

Consumption of pork is growing rapidly in Australia. Only a small proportion of pork is produced in free range systems in Australia, and there are environmental limits to scaling up free range production, due to the soil and climate conditions required. Transformative change in pig welfare may require a reduction in pig meat consumption, as well as significant changes to production systems. It would also require 'resetting' the fundamental direction of policy and regulation to focus on achieving healthy, sustainable and fair food systems that prioritise high standards of animal welfare.

What can consumers do to improve hen welfare?

Consumers who choose to eat pork can contribute to improved pig welfare by reducing their pork consumption and by buying the highest welfare pig meat that they can afford. In the major supermarkets, free range pork accredited under the RSPCA Approved standard provides some of the highest welfare standards for both piglets and sows. Free range products from smaller scale free range systems are also available at farmers' markets and independent stores.

Citizens can advocate for better pig welfare by asking supermarkets to improve their animal welfare standards, by making complaints about misleading and deceptive claims about welfare on pig meat products and by asking their local MP to advocate for stronger farm animal welfare regulation and a ban on sow stalls.

More information

This briefing was prepared by Christine Parker, Rachel Carey and Gyorgy Scrinis.

This briefing should be cited as Parker, C., Carey, R. and Scrinis, G. (2018) Higher welfare labelling for pig meat: A summary of findings from the project *Regulating Food Labels: The case of free range food products in Australia*. University of Melbourne.

For more information about the project see (project website) or contact:

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