Visit of Thönes Natur-Verbund slaughterhouse

Observations on the slaughter of pigs

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Present
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Slaughterhouse: Klemens Hinssen, Simone Rütten and Bruno Jöbkes.

Introduction
On October the 14th 2015, Margreet and Madelaine from Eyes on Animal visited Thönes Natur-Verbund slaughterhouse in Wachtendonk. Thönes is a small slaughterhouse that slaughters pigs, cows, bulls, calves, turkeys, hens and broilers from free range farms. At the moment of our visit the slaughterhouse was not operative. So we only saw the equipment that was used to stun, move and house the animals but did not see any activity. During this first tour we noticed that Thönes used a corral shaped raceway to move the pigs from the lairage into the single-file chute leading to the electric stunner. It looked a bit similar to a corral system that was invented by Temple Grandin, a famous ethologist and expert in design of livestock facilities. We had never seen such a design in practice because most slaughterhouses in the Netherlands have switched to CO2 and those still using electricity have the standard straight raceway into the single-file chute. We have our concerns about the ethical implications of CO2 and thus are interested in any alternative that is more humane to move and stun pigs. Perhaps this corral design would solve the one ethical concern of the electric stunning system- that of bottle necking when moving the pigs from a group to a single file? An appointment was made for the 30th of November to observe the handling and stunning of the pigs through their design. This report covers our observations on November 30th of the pig slaughter at Thönes slaughterhouse.

Handling and stunning of pigs

Facts: Thönes slaughters 100-110 pigs per hour. Their maximum capacity is 175 pigs per hour.

Lairage

The pigs in the lairage where very calm. We saw them exploring or resting. They were kept in social groups by using partitions. We did not observe any hierarchy fights. The pigs all had their tails and looked healthy. We saw one pig with an umbilical hernia.

Pigs were curious and showing explorative behavior

When the gates were closed and opened, there was some noise caused by metal banging to metal. The pigs in the lairage pens had enough space.

The gates were made of metal, which made noise when closing and opening

Moving the pigs

The raceway towards the single-file chute was corral shaped. This means the pigs were moved to the single file chute in a curve, which gives them the impression that they will eventually be returning to where they come from.

The raceway was curved, which reduced fright and stress within pigs.

The end of the single file chute was open and lit up with extra lighting, so the pigs have the impression that there is an exit

The end of the single file chute was lit up to ease movement. Pigs prefer to move from dark to light.

Because of the corral shaped raceway and light at the end of the single file chute, the movement of the pigs towards the electrical stunner went very smoothly. The pigs were moved from the lairage pens to the corral

shaped raceway in groups of 3-8 pigs. With 8 pigs the raceway was almost full. Pigs seemed calmer and moved most easily when the handler did not place more than 5 at a time here.

Sometimes the raceway was too full.

The handler was very quiet, he did not talk and only used a yellow plastic panel to move the pigs. Sometimes he touched the hindquarter of the pig lightly. He knew exactly where he needed to walk or stand to make the pigs move in the desired direction and understood the pigs flight zone. Before the pigs went into the single file chute they were sprayed with water to improve the conduction of electricity.

Before stunning pigs were wetted. For the movement of the pigs just one worker and his plastic panel were enough.

The curved raceway had two entrances to the single file chute. This design was based on the idea that pigs always try to find an escape route. As the handler moved the pigs towards one of the entrances, the pigs choose the other entrance most of the time. This design was done on purpose, using the pigs´ behavior and predicting the way they would react.

The corral shaped raceway had two entrances to the single file chute, so the pigs have a choice.

Most of the pigs entered the single file chute without distress. However, the floor of the single file chute was very slippery, causing some pigs to lose their balance and slip once they entered. Those pigs were clearly in distress. They tried to get back on their feet, but repeatedly failed due to the slippery floor.

The floor of the single file chute was very slippery, some pigs had difficulties remaining upright..

In the single file chute there was a hydraulic door-pusher. It would gently push the pigs forward should the pig balk. It was designed with sensors so was only set to push if the pig was not walking on his own. It also worked as a divider, to prevent pigs in front from walking backwards onto the ones waiting behind. This movable part of the chute had two green plastic noise dampeners to avoid metal banging to metal. Additionally, the second half of the floor of the single-file chute was a conveyer belt that also turned on as soon as the pig stopped walking. The hissing noise of the hydraulic equipment was carried outside the premise via pipes. The noise in the slaughterhouse was less loud than we have experienced in other slaughterhouses. At the end of the conveyer belt

floor there was a gap with a metal bar in front. We saw several pigs coming off of the conveyor belt and getting their feet stuck in the gap before the electric stunners were placed. This obviously caused pain while the pig was still conscious.

There was an unnecessary gap at the end of the conveyer belt, where feet got stuck and hit the metal bar

Stunning

At the end of the single file chute pigs were stunned by electricity on the head and then to the heart. The metal walls of the restraint- box closed automatically and squeezed the pigs into upright position for stunning. We did see some pigs that tried to push their heads through the opening on the side of the fixation box. Head stunning was done manually, heart stunning automatically with electric currents transferred via the metal sides of the restrainer.

The end of the chute was open, so sometimes pigs tried to get through

The worker that stunned the pigs was very calm. He took his time to place the electrical prongs correctly and acted with confidence. We did not see any pigs that were incorrectly stunned or insufficiently unconscious. The stunning was followed by debleeding within 6 seconds on average. The worker also checked if the pigs showed signs of consciousness by doing an eye reflex test after sticking and cutting them.

Consciousness was tested with an eyelid reflex test after cutting.

Background information

The corral shaped raceway was designed by the father-in-law of Klemens in mid-1990s, after years of practical experience working with pigs. Thönes has a patent on it. Klemens does not know off-hand how much it cost to build the corral shaped raceway, but he says the investment was worth it as they receive the costs back in the form of better quality meat and a label.

Film showing Thönes corral shaped raceway: http://we.tl/XIAPjOTeES

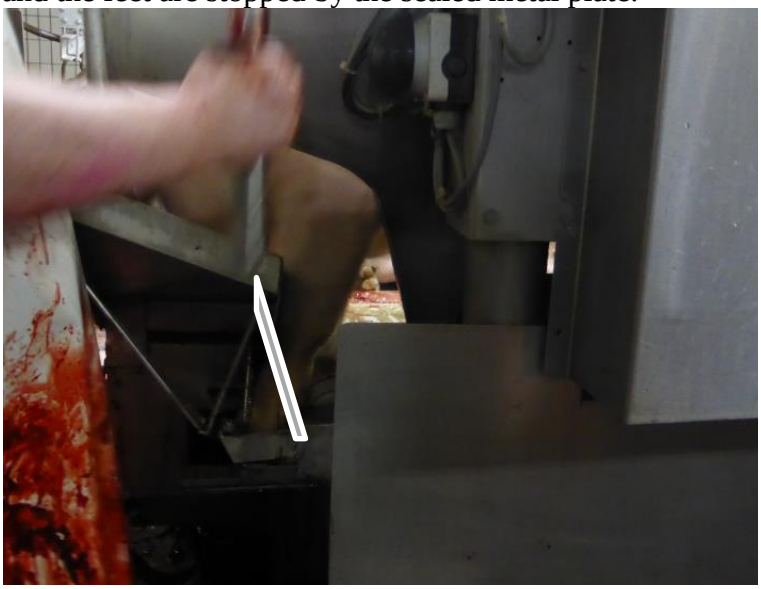
Klemens told us that having considerate, calm and stable people working with the animals in the slaughterhouse is absolutely vital for good pig welfare, but hard to find. To keep their stress low it is important that workers are given a fair salary, a contract to give them job-security and enough time to do their work properly. Klemens estimates he could increase slaughter speed to maximum 170 pigs an hour. But if his slaughterhouse would become bigger, he would build more corral shaped raceways instead of one bigger one. He assumes moving the pigs in a bigger corral shaped raceway will lead to problems with moving the pigs into the single file chute.

General impression

Eyes on Animals was very impressed with how this corral-shaped design really eased the movement of groups of pigs into a single-file. This is exactly the point of stress in other slaughterhouses that use electric stunning, but it seems this curved design with two entrances is a solution. We were also impressed with the low-level of noise in the entire plant and that only one worker was needed in the lairage. The workers all appeared concentrated, calm and competent.. This plant is run by people genuinely concerned about the welfare of animals and passionate to design equipment around the animals' behavior to reduce stress as much as possible. The transparency of this plant was also superb, Eyes on Animals was allowed to film and take photos and ask all the questions we wanted. There are a few points where we think the plant could make further improvements, these are listed directly below.

Recommendations

1. We recommend to make the floor inside the single- file chute much less slippery so the pigs feel confident walking on it. Examples: http://www.slipnot.com/blog/safety-guidelines-livestock-holding/ Make sure the new floor in the single file chute is similar in color to the floor in the raceway. Sudden change of floor-type (drastic change in texture or color) can cause pigs to balk.
2. Close the gap at the end of the conveyer belt to prevent legs from getting caught. Suggestion: bend the metal piece closer to the end of the conveyor belt, or weld another piece on, so there is no gap anymore and the feet are stopped by the sealed metal plate.



Close the gap in the fixation box to prevent legs getting caught

3. Use gates from hard plastic instead of metal, so noise caused by metal banging to metal will be prevented. Example: http://fencepanelss.net/plastic-fence-panels/ Or use rubber stickers or knobs as an alternative, to prevent metal banging to metal when gates are closed.

Hard plastic gates



Rubber-stickers and knobs to prevent metal banging to metal

4. Play soft music in the lairages. Research shows that melodious music (classical and soft pop) lowers the heart rate, which indicates a lower stress level in animals. When soft music is played, pigs also startle less easily from sudden noises.

5. Find more "best-practice" ideas to improve pig welfare on our website: http://www.eyesonanimals.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Animal-welfare-in-pig-slaughterhouses-how-to-reduce-stress-suffering-and-ease-handling.pdf

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Thönes Natur-Verbund for being so open and hospitable. We were very impressed by the corral-shaped raceway, the willingness to further improve pig welfare and the company's transparency. We are especially thankful for being allowed to film. These films made us able to observe the techniques and animal welfare behavior even more thoroughly. This also helped us in preparing a recommendation adjusted to the situation at Thönes. We hope to continue this fruitful cooperation. Together we can make a difference for many pigs. Thank you!