

The Interplay of Animal Welfare Perceptions and Market Approach in Hoop House Pork Production

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Deep-bedded hoop house production systems (hoops) have become a widely-dispersed and well-established swine system alternative to conventional production systems in Iowa and elsewhere. Animal behaviorists have found that hoop systems provide welfare benefits for the animals housed in them as compared to conventional systems. Growing public and consumer concern about farm animal welfare in conventional systems, and the corresponding increase in demand for welfare-friendly meat, may present new opportunities for hoop producers.

Field research was conducted 2002-2003, including in-depth qualitative interviews with 14 Iowa hoop house pork producers, using a “snowball” sample to capture geographic diversity, and include both smaller and larger scale producers. Interview topics included: 1) enterprise history and decision-making; 2) current production practices; 3) animal welfare perceptions; 4) perceptions of human and community health/environmental impacts; 5) marketing and prospects. Interviews were taped, transcribed and analyzed for patterns.

All producers observed animal welfare benefits in hoop systems, compared to conventional confinement systems. These observed benefits included: increased space per animal, enhanced experiential opportunities due to corn stalk bedding, and fewer indications of stress like tail biting and pacing. Most producers also expressed personal pleasure and satisfaction observing and interacting with hoop house pigs. Producers’ orientation to and emphasis on animal welfare varied based on their market approach. Conventional marketers tended to discuss animal welfare less and to focus on cost savings as the major economic benefit of hoop systems. Niche marketers tended to discuss animal welfare more, and talk about the role it plays as an important component of their marketing strategy, leading to economic benefits. Animal welfare characteristics aid niche marketers in product differentiation. Customer willingness-to-pay for animal welfare creates a robust market for hoop-raised pork. Understanding the motivations and constraints producers face in satisfying that market will be important to the future expansion of hoop production systems.