

# Increasing lactation length improves sow performance

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Short lactation lengths (average ~16 days) have been an industry standard in North America for a number of years, and were adopted to reduce disease transfer between the sow and her litter. This practice, however, appears to reduce sow performance. We evaluated the benefit to sow performance of increasing lactation length from 11 to 21 days in a retrospective analysis of the lifetime histories of 33,000 sows, from the PigChamp database of three large production systems between 2000 and 2005, two in Canada and one in the US.

A similar overall herd subsequent litter size born (10.81 pigs) and born alive (10.06 pigs) was observed with lactation lengths of 11 to 15 days. Subsequent litter size increased ( $P < 0.001$ ) progressively, by 0.85 pigs born and 0.59 pigs born alive, as lactation length increased from 11 to 15 days to a maximum of 20 to 21 days. The effect of lactation length on subsequent litter size was less pronounced in Parity 1 sows. About a 0.3 pig increase in subsequent pigs born and born alive occurred when lactation length increased from 11-15 days to 16–21 days in these sows. Larger increases were observed in older sows.

As lactation length increased more sows had a wean-to-service interval of less than 7 days ( $WSI < 7$  d) and a higher proportion of sows were bred. The percentage of sows with a  $WSI < 7$  d increased as lactation length increased from 11-12 days (42%), to 13 days (69%), 14-17 days (82%), and to 18-21 days (86%). Fewer Parity 1 sows had a  $WSI < 7$  d, the percentage increased from 47% to 72% as lactation length increased from 11-12 days to 18-21 days. The percentage of sows bred increased as lactation length increased from 11 days (68%), to 12-13 days (78%), and to 14-21 days (87%).

## Implications:

Producers should evaluate the costs and benefits of increasing their average lactation length from 16-17 days to 20 or more days, bearing in mind the improvement in sow performance obtained from longer lactations. This analysis did not evaluate lactation lengths longer than 21 days.