

Managing Weight of Market Hogs Before Show

Jodi Sterle, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Extension Swine Specialist
Texas AgriLife Extension/Texas A&M System

Introduction

Managing the weight of your market hog may be the most important part of preparing for the show. Most hogs have a five pound “window” that is their “perfect weight”. While deciding on the window for each individual hog is a science and an art, getting your pig to weigh its perfect weight on show day starts long before the show.

Objective

- To provide youth swine exhibitors with step-by-step instructions for managing weight of market hogs for exhibition.

Information:

Prior to purchasing your pigs

- Know the rules of the show. Before you go to a sale or a breeder’s farm to pick out your pig, ask yourself:
 - Are gilts allowed to show?
 - When is the show?
 - How old should the pigs be today?
 - Do they show by breed or weight only?
 - How much should the ideal pig weigh today?
 - How much am I willing to spend?
- Get out the calendar. Know how many days until the show. This will help you decide on an appropriate starting weight and age.
- If you don’t own a set of scales – arrange for using one. This is one of the most important pieces of equipment you can use. Scales can be damaged during transport from one place to another, and diseases can also be transmitted by sharing sets of scales, so if possible, invest in a set! Personal experience: Used sets of scales that have been well taken care of are in high demand by new 4-H/FFA feeders. Resale value is high.

Approximately three to four months prior to show:

- Get out the calendar – again.
- Start weighing on a regular (weekly) basis.

How to weigh

Sounds so simple, right? But not setting up the scales properly, weighing at various times of the day, etc., can lead to a lot of variation in weight. Follow these steps:

- ***Weigh at the same time of day each time you weigh.*** An animal's weight can vary greatly throughout the course of each day. Weighing at the same time of the day (i.e. Sunday evening before feeding) will help you more accurately chart out actual growth rate.
- ***Make the scales a "happy place".*** Pigs have great memories. A negative experience in the scales once can impact how that pig responds each time it is weighed. The first few times, leave both gates open, sprinkle some feed on the floor of the scale, and allow the pig to walk into the scale with little prodding. Allow the pig to walk off on its own. Training the pig a few times before you actually start recording weights will make the pig easy to work with the rest of the feeding period.
- ***Sweep shavings, manure, etc. from in and around the scale.*** Make sure the scale body swings freely without obstruction like shavings. Sweep out any manure, shavings or dirt from the inside of the scale.
- ***Tare the scale.*** If you have a set of scales with a digital head, there should be a "tare" or "zero" button that will automatically set the scale weight to zero. If you have a beam scale, use the wingnuts and tare weight on the right hand side of the top of the scale to set the beam to *barely touch the top of the box*. A common mistake is to tare the beam to sit in the middle of the box. (Figure: "weighing 2")
- ***Open both gates of the scale.*** Pigs do not have great eyesight, so being able to see all the way through the scale will encourage them to step in, without feeling threatened.
- ***Ease pig on to the scale.*** Some prodding is necessary, especially at the beginning of the feeding period. Having sorting boards or gates that can be swung behind the pig to keep it from backing up with help encourage the animal to step on the scale.
- ***Carefully close both gates.*** Avoid slamming the gates, especially the one in front of the pig.
- ***Make sure nothing is touching the scale.*** Avoid leaning on or touching the scale when reading it. Especially check any swing gates that you may have used.
- ***Read beam scale "in the middle".*** Move the slide until the beam balances in the middle of the box. (Figure: "weighing 1"; Figure: "weighing 3")
- ***Record the weights.*** Keep a calendar or notebook with information, including pig ID, date, weight.
- ***Calculate the average daily gain, days to show, and predict weight of the pig at weigh-in for the show. Record data.*** Keep in mind that a pig's daily gain changes over time, but you can get a good idea if your animal is going to be at its optimum weight on show day. If you are going to a show that has a weigh back or that requires you to turn in a weigh card, know the rules and develop a strategy for feeding and declaring the weight you are turning in. (See text box for formulas).
- ***Adjust your feeding program accordingly, avoiding any large changes in amount or type of feed.*** By weighing your pigs on a regular schedule and calculating what they will weigh on show day, you can avoid having to make drastic changes in the type or amount of feed you are feeding daily. If you predict that your pig is getting too heavy, or not gaining fast enough, you can make small

adjustments to its diet, and also seek advice from adult leaders, county extension agents, agriscience instructors, breeders, etc. to determine what to change. Changes in the diet (either type of feed or supplement or amount) should be made gradually to avoid problems such as diarrhea or going off feed.

As your pig grows, you will most likely make several changes to its diet. Weighing on a regular basis, predicting its future weight, and weighing properly will help ensure that your pig walks into the ring looking its best!

$$\text{Average daily gain (pounds)} = \frac{\text{Weight today} - \text{Previous weight}}{\text{Number of days between weights}}$$

$$\text{Predicting optimal weight (pounds)} = \text{Ave. daily gain} \times \text{Number of days until show}$$

