

## Pigs on the move

A new device created by a southwest Minnesota producer is making life easier for pig farmers everywhere

By Per Peterson  
Tracy Area Headlight Herald

You have no doubt heard of pigs in a blanket. But what about pigs within a conveyor belt?

Tracy farmer Jay Fultz certainly has heard of both, and found that using the latter will save him time, money and wear and tear on his body when it comes to vaccinating his pigs.

The conveyor belt comes from the mind of Ghent farmer Brad Hennen, who just recently sold Fultz one of his new pig chutes, which Fultz has quickly grown to appreciate.

“The big thing for us is, it’s a time-saver — not only the physical time that we use, but also we don’t need as many guys to work with it,” Fultz said. “The bigger thing is, it’s physically easier on us. And it makes us more efficient.”

Hennen has a finishing barn near Ghent that holds about 750 pigs and sells breeding stock in Minnesota and the Dakotas for a genetics company. He said his device solves a big problem for farmers: How do they restrain pigs during the vaccination process.

“If the pig is really small in the farrowing crate, typically they’re picked up, and one person holds them, while another person vaccinates,” Hennen said. “As they get bigger it becomes more and more challenging. What I designed is a conveyor that the pigs are transported through, and it’s designed to restrain them while they’re being vaccinated.”

Hennen originally worked with Marshall Machine Shop about three years ago on the design of the chute; about a year after that, he started collaborating with a business in South Dakota, which he said had more flexibility time-wise to create the chute. He looked at different designs before coming up with the idea of an actual conveyor — two belts on either side that form a “V” shape. The conveyor, he said, is adjustable for different-sized pigs and can handle pigs as small as 10 pounds and those as large as 50 pounds.

“The whole objective is just to get the pigs’ feet off the ground,” he said. “Once the pig’s feet are off the ground, he’s just kind of wedged in there and generally just looks forward to getting out of the other end of the conveyor where he can hop off and run around again.”

Hennen, whose wife, Barb (Mix), grew up in Tracy, said it was about four years ago when the idea of his new system came to him at a task force that was part of a pork board meeting in Atlanta. He said pork producers at that time were trying to come up with a way to try to eliminate broken needles that, he said, are occasionally found in pork.

“That doesn’t happen very often, but even one in a million ... we looked at it from a lot of different ways,” he said. “What the industry had not ever figured out is a way to restrain the pigs properly.”

Prior to implementing the new conveyor system, Fultz said the process included having one worker pick each pig, one person giving the vaccination, and about four to five men in the pen picking up one to two pigs at a time and taking them over to the person who is doing the vaccinating.

“It was always five or six guys, and by the time you were done you are just physically tired — from the squatting down to pick up the pig, putting it down in the alley,” said Fultz. “They have to have their front hooves on the ground. You’re lifting up and there’s always a big drop down because you’re doing it over the top of a gate. Generally, the next day for me ... my hamstrings would be really sore, my back would be sore.”

Such is not the case any longer, as Fultz is now able to sit in a chair during the entire vaccination process. Sitting over the conveyor belt — which was retrofitted a bit, as Fultz worked with DeSmet Weldors to add an angled shield on either the side of the belt — Fultz simply bends over a bit and delivers a quick shot behind a pig’s ear. On Monday, he and his crew vaccinated 2,500 pigs with Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome Vaccine, and he didn’t have to bend over or squat once.

“It’s easier on the guys,” he said. “And it’s easier on the pigs.”

Easier on the pigs? Fultz said pigs aren’t big fans of being picked up, and the new process limits that two-fold.

“They’re not used to being off the ground — they squeal and they squirm ... they don’t like getting the shot anyways,” said Fultz. “Then when you put them down they’re still agitated, whereas now, they’re walking, they get to go through the conveyor ... and they never really get picked up. It’s so much easier on them.”

Fultz said the new chute cuts the vaccination time in half. Considering anywhere between 5,600-6,000 pigs come through his farm every six-and-a-half weeks, that time saved adds up. Hennen’s portable device is still new to Fultz; he started using it about two weeks ago.

“It’s about 110-120 pounds, so when we move it we just stick it in the back of the truck,” said Fultz, who came upon the device at a pork convention in Mankato earlier this year. “It’s a neat machine. You just plug it in, and you can control the speed, you can adjust the height and width on it.”

Each unit runs \$6,000, and Fultz said his will pay for itself by the end of the year.

“Money very well-spent,” he said. “I figure between the time savings, and being able to use fewer guys, within a year it will be paid for.”

Hennen has displayed the chute at a few trade shows around the country and said although he is set on the final design he is always open to modify it in the future. He currently has created 11 different models; he has delivered four in just the last month, including two in Colorado, one in Texas. He has also sold chutes in Minnesota and South Dakota.



TRACY FARMER JAY FULTZ uses his new conveyor to vaccinate pigs at his farming operation Monday. The device, which he has been using for only a couple of weeks, was designed by Brad Hennen of Ghent to make the vaccination process easier. Tracy Area Headlight Herald image / Per Peterson