

How to adapt European pig farm technology in Latin America

A sustainable and profitable pig farm with training facilities in Colombia transfers Western European technology to the Latin American pig industry by way of hands-on training.

BY LUC WILLEKENS

The pig sector in Latin America is developing rapidly. The population is expanding fast, and thanks to the growing economy, Latin Americans have more to spend, which stimulates the consumption of pig meat. For example, in 2003, a Colombian consumed an average of three kilos of pig meat per year. In 2015, consumption was up to almost eight kilos.

To meet this increasing demand, scaling up is necessary, but that's not the only challenge the continent is facing. It's also important to improve animal health and welfare. Governments strive to build farms at a European level, with healthy pigs that barely need antibiotics. How can this be realized?

None of my business

For most Latin American pig farmers, Western European techniques are far removed from their daily reality. No matter how enthusiastically Europeans talk about their promising methods, the probability that Latin America will implement them — just by word



A modern, working pig farm ensures the production methods taught are profitable ones.

of mouth — is low. This is mainly because of the huge dissimilarities: a different climate, diverse realities and different feeding schedules. If you want to convince the Latin American pig farmer, new methods adapted to local conditions need to be used.

Two pioneers rose to the challenge and founded a completely new pig farm with training facilities in Colombia. The Colombian veterinarian Edgar Villamizar and Dutch pig farmer Luc Willekens started building innovative facilities in 2013. They founded their business and working methods on Western European standards and management style. It was a huge project that was started from scratch, including the electricity, water and the access road. In 2014, the first sows came in, and by 2015, the pig farm was in full production.

Exchange of European working methods

In addition to the closed pig farm, which includes on-farm A.I., a knowledge and demonstrations center was set up. Here, Western European suppliers

Photos by Luc Willekens

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demonstrate how their products operate under tropical conditions. Training is provided to exchange the European working methods. According to Villamizar, this is needed. “Currently, Latin American pig farmers primarily look for knowledge in the U.S., methods mainly aimed at ‘more’ and ‘bigger,’ while Europeans focus above all on optimization. That’s a different way of thinking. In the training center, the pig industry can experience first-hand how the European pig husbandry, with its innovative and proven techniques, works and with what results,” he explained.

The training center presents innovative ideas, which are directly relevant to the local field.

The training center is now fully operational, and the reactions are unquestionable. “This field experience is very inspiring,” said José Ramirez of Grupo APA Colombia (12,000 sows) from Medellín. “It per-



European production methods must be adapted to the tropical climate of Latin-America.

EUROPEAN PIG FARM TECHNOLOGY

mits knowledge sharing, debating and discovering new concepts. We had heard of the techniques but did not have direct access to them. It's about state-of-the-art concepts, having direct access to innovative knowledge."

Training process in practice

How does the training process actually work in practice? According to technical director Angelo Morales, most companies prefer a group training session for up to ten people. Often participants come from different Latin American countries. Together they are completely immersed in the Western European approach. To ensure bio security, precautions are taken. Cars, smartphones and clothes remain at the hotel, and participants travel to the pig farm by bus in special company uniforms. "This way it doesn't matter if you work for a small family business or a major integrator; the hierarchy is gone. Everybody is cut off from the outside world, which enables you to immerse in the teaching material effortlessly, without any distraction."

The group stays together for one week. Each group is made up of a variety of people, from veterinarians to zootechnicians, standing on decades of theoretical and



Hands-on training ensures understanding beyond learning.

practical expertise. A team of six trainers, all specialized in a specific discipline, including a professor, master of business administration and a moderator with psychological background, work to show the group the benefits of other methods. Besides presentations of scientific research results and own field studies, the participants are directly in practice with the animals. They live the

presented results proven in practice. The exchange of experiences is also an important part of the course.

Differences in production methods

Latin American working methods are completely different from the way we work in Europe, due to differences of realities and opinions. This immediately becomes clear in the demonstration center. Take, for example, the method of feeding. In Latin America, rearing of gilts is focused on as fast as possible growth and early age at first service. Breeding gilts are fed rapidly. In Europe, restricted feeding is used so gilts are bred more mature. Field results show better animal performance and better economic efficiency: more kilos of meat per sow, per year, and a higher sow longevity.

There are more differences generating discussions, for example:

- Rearing of piglets with emphasis on ingestion and digestion pre-weaning resulting in better feed efficiency and more first quality fatteners delivered per sow
- Optimal moment of insemination resulting in less A.I. doses per cycle and higher number of live births and fertility

The key is to implement European techniques adapted to tropical circumstances.

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Production managers from across Latin America are not easy to re-educate on foreign methods.