



What Pig Farms Often Miss — Even When Feed Is Expensive

Knowledge Note #2:

Before pigs even eat: where feed loss begins on the farm

Feed efficiency discussions on pig farms usually begin at the feeder.

In reality, a significant share of feed loss occurs **long before pigs interact with feed at all**. Once feed arrives on the farm, its cost is already sunk. From that point on, the way it is delivered, stored, moved and controlled determines how much of that cost ever reaches the pig — and how much quietly disappears.

Much of the thinking in this Knowledge Note draws on long-term field experience from international pig consultants, including **John Carr**, whose work has consistently shown that early-stage feed losses are common, underestimated, and rarely managed as a system.

Feed loss often starts with delivery — and is quickly forgotten

Feed spillage during delivery is one of the most common and least questioned sources of waste on pig farms.

Split feed under bins, spilled during unloading, or left after delivery is often viewed as inevitable. Because each incident looks small, it rarely triggers corrective action. Yet these losses repeat with every delivery, week after week, year after year.

Spilled feed also creates secondary losses. It attracts rodents, birds and other animals that not only consume feed directly but contaminate what remains. Once this pattern is established, farms often end up feeding far more mouths than pigs alone — without ever accounting for it. Because these losses occur outside pens and away from pigs, they are easy to overlook. But economically, they are no less real than feed dropped inside a building.

Storage matters: when feed quality quietly degrades

Feed that arrives on farm in good condition does not necessarily stay that way.

Poorly sealed bins, condensation, moisture ingress, and exposure to heat all contribute to gradual feed degradation. This is especially relevant for creep and specialty feeds, which are often stored in warm environments for convenience.

When feed quality declines, wastage takes a subtle form. Feed may still be eaten, but palatability drops. Intake patterns change. Digestibility suffers. None of this shows up as “waste” in feed usage records — yet performance is affected.

From a system perspective, **feed that has lost part of its nutritional value is already partially wasted**, even if it is consumed.

This type of loss is particularly difficult to detect because it does not look like a mistake. It looks like normal feeding — just with poorer outcomes.

Feed outages: the most underestimated loss point

Among all early-stage feed losses, feed outages are often the most damaging — and the least recognised.

Short interruptions to feed supply are extremely common on pig farms. They may result from bin mismanagement, auger issues, blocked lines, miscommunication between teams, or simple oversight. Because pigs eventually get fed again, these events are rarely recorded or analysed. Yet even relatively brief feed outages can disrupt digestion and feeding behaviour. Repeated interruptions create chronic inefficiencies that show up later as poorer feed conversion, uneven growth, or health problems — without being traced back to their origin.

Importantly, feed outages are **not a feeding strategy issue**. They are a **system reliability issue**. Farms may invest heavily in feed formulation and genetics while leaving basic delivery continuity unmanaged.

When outages are treated as normal, their cost becomes invisible.

Feed movement on the farm: losses between bin and pen

Every time feed is handled, moved or transferred, the risk of loss increases.

Feed barrows, bags and intermediate storage points are often exposed to rain, contamination or spillage. Overfilled barrows, uncovered transport, and repeated handling all contribute to gradual feed loss that is rarely measured.

These losses are rarely dramatic. They happen quietly — a little here, a little there — and are absorbed into daily routines. Because they are labour-related, they often increase when farms are understaffed or under pressure.

From a system perspective, this is a design issue.

The more steps feed must pass through before reaching pigs, the more opportunity there is for waste.

The invisible consumers: feed eaten by non-pigs

Not all feed consumed on a pig farm is eaten by pigs.

Rodents, birds and other vermin can consume significant quantities of feed directly. More importantly, their presence contaminates additional feed, rendering it unpalatable or unsafe. This leads to secondary losses that are rarely counted.

Because these animals operate out of sight and outside pens, their impact is often underestimated. Yet over time, their cumulative feed consumption can be substantial — particularly on farms with poor bin sealing, uncovered feeders, or easy access points. Managing these losses is not about hygiene theatre. It is about acknowledging that **unaccounted feed consumption is still feed loss.**

Why these losses persist

Early-stage feed losses persist not because farms are careless, but because they are **structural**.

They sit between responsibilities. They are spread across time. They are rarely dramatic enough to demand attention. And because they occur before pigs eat, they are often disconnected from performance discussions.

Feed costs may rise, but without visibility, routines remain unchanged.

Seeing these loss points clearly is the first step toward understanding feed efficiency as a whole-farm system — not just a feeding task.

In the next Knowledge Note, we move closer to the pig and examine how feeders, daily habits and human behaviour continue to shape feed loss once feed finally reaches the pen.

This Knowledge Note is part of a series

What Pig Farms Often Miss — Even When Feed Is Expensive

- **Knowledge Note #1:** Feed wastage is rarely an accident — it's usually built into the system
- **Knowledge Note #2:** Before pigs even eat: where feed loss begins on the farm (*you are here*)
- **Knowledge Note #3:** Feeders, habits and human behaviour: how good feed gets wasted daily
- **Knowledge Note #4:** When pigs eat but don't convert: health, digestion and invisible feed loss
- **Knowledge Note #5:** Knowing when to stop feeding: discipline, flow and hard decisions