



What Pig Farms Often Miss — Even When Feed Is Expensive

Knowledge Note #3

Feeders, habits and human behaviour: how good feed gets wasted daily

Once feed reaches the pen, attention often shifts to diets, growth rates and performance numbers.

Yet day-to-day feed efficiency on pig farms is shaped less by formulation than by **how feeders are managed — and how people interact with them.**

Much of the thinking in this Knowledge Note draws on long-term field experience from international pig consultants, including **John Carr**, whose work repeatedly highlights how small, routine decisions around feeders quietly determine whether feed is converted into growth or lost along the way.

Feeders are not passive equipment

On many farms, feeders are treated as static objects: installed once, adjusted occasionally, and otherwise left alone. In reality, feeders are active interfaces between pigs, people and feed flow. When feeders are poorly positioned, incorrectly adjusted, or difficult to inspect, feed loss becomes part of daily routine rather than an exception. Because this loss happens gradually, it rarely triggers alarms — yet it accumulates over time.

From a system perspective, **feeders require as much daily attention as pigs do.**

Overfilling feeders: when “safe” feels efficient

One of the most common causes of feed wastage is overfilled feeders.

Overfilling often feels like a sensible precaution. It reduces the risk of pigs running out of feed, saves time during busy periods, and avoids complaints about hungry animals. Yet feeders that consistently overrun create several hidden problems.

Excess feed is more likely to become powdery, spilled, or fouled. Pigs sort through it rather than consume it efficiently. Dust increases, palatability declines, and feed intake becomes uneven. What looks like generosity at the feeder often turns into waste on the floor.

Daily adjustment matters more than feeder design

Modern feeders are often evaluated on design features, capacity, or automation. While design matters, **daily adjustment matters more**.

Feeders that are not adjusted regularly tend to drift toward inefficiency. A small change in downpipe height, flow rate or gate opening can significantly affect how much feed is exposed — and how much ends up wasted.

On well-managed farms, daily feeder adjustment is treated as a core task, not a background chore. Where this discipline slips, feed wastage usually follows.

Feeder placement shapes pig behaviour

Where feeders are placed within a pen has a direct impact on how pigs use them.

Feeders positioned too close to walls, partitions or drinkers can restrict access to feed space. Feeders placed in cold or draughty areas are more likely to become fouled, as pigs avoid them or use nearby areas as toilets. When pigs have to walk long distances between feeders and drinkers, they often carry feed in their mouths — dropping it along the way.

These losses are rarely dramatic. They appear as scattered pellets, damp feed, or dirty floors. Over time, however, they represent a steady drain on feed efficiency.

Weekend routines and the cost of convenience

Weekend feeding routines are a well-known pressure point on pig farms.

To reduce labour demands, feeders are often overfilled in advance. While this may seem practical, it frequently leads to increased wastage. Feed sits exposed for longer periods, becomes stale or soiled, and is more easily wasted by pigs.

The issue here is not commitment or carelessness. It is the quiet trade-off between convenience and precision. When convenience consistently wins, feed loss becomes routine.

Feed space and competition: uneven access, uneven outcomes

Insufficient feed space creates competition, particularly among young or newly weaned pigs. When pigs have to fight for access, dominant animals consume more than they need, while weaker pigs eat irregularly.

This leads to uneven growth, poorer feed conversion, and greater wastage as pigs spill feed during competition. These effects often show up later as performance variation — without being linked back to feeder setup.

Providing adequate feed space is not just about fairness. It is a feed efficiency decision.

Seeing feeders as a management system

Feeders sit at the intersection of equipment, people and pigs. How they are managed reflects daily priorities, time pressure, and farm culture.

When feeders are treated as “set and forget” equipment, feed loss becomes invisible. When they are treated as dynamic systems requiring observation and adjustment, feed efficiency improves — often without changing diets or suppliers.

The difference is rarely technology.

It is attention.

In the next Knowledge Note, we move inside the pig to examine how health, digestion and stress silently waste feed — even when feeding systems appear well managed.

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
- **Knowledge Note #3:** Feeders, habits and human behaviour: how good feed gets wasted daily (*you are here*)
- **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