



What Pig Farms Often Miss — Even When Feed Is Expensive

Knowledge Note #5

Knowing when to stop feeding: discipline, flow and hard decisions

Feed efficiency is often discussed in terms of how to feed pigs better.

Less attention is given to **when feeding should end** — or when continuing to feed no longer makes economic or biological sense.

Yet some of the most significant feed losses on pig farms occur **after the outcome is already determined**, when feed continues to be invested in animals or situations that can no longer return value.

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 that discipline in flow and decision-making is as important to feed efficiency as diets, equipment or management routines.

Feeding is an investment — not an obligation

Once feed enters a system, it is easy to treat feeding as automatic. Animals are present, therefore they are fed.

From a feed efficiency perspective, however, feeding is an **investment decision**. Feed should be directed toward animals that can convert it into growth, value, or reproductive output. When that potential is gone, continued feeding becomes loss.

This shift in mindset — from obligation to assessment — is uncomfortable. It challenges habits, emotional attachments, and routines built around continuity rather than outcomes.

Non-productive animals and quiet feed loss

Some feed losses occur not because animals are sick or visibly compromised, but because they are **no longer productive**.

Non-pregnant sows that remain unidentified, cull animals that are retained “a little longer”, or breeding animals kept past their economic usefulness continue to consume feed without contributing proportionally to output.

Individually, these animals may seem insignificant. Collectively, they represent a steady, predictable drain on feed resources — one that rarely appears in daily performance discussions.

Finishing pigs beyond the optimal point

In finishing systems, knowing when to market pigs is as important as how they are fed.

Pigs held beyond optimal slaughter weights often consume large amounts of feed for diminishing returns. Once animals move outside slaughter grids or payment matrices, additional feed no longer pays for itself — and may even reduce net value.

These losses are rarely dramatic. They occur incrementally, as pigs are kept “just a bit longer” to reach targets that no longer align with market reality.

Runts, chronic cases and the cost of hope

Some of the hardest decisions on pig farms involve compromised animals.

Small pigs, chronic hospital cases, or animals with long-standing health issues may continue to eat feed while making little or no progress toward marketability. In these situations, hope often replaces assessment.

From a feed efficiency perspective, this is not a moral issue. It is a biological and economic one. Feed invested in animals that cannot recover is feed diverted from those that can.

Clear review points, time limits, and outcome-based decisions protect both feed resources and overall system performance.

Flow discipline protects feed efficiency

Feed efficiency is inseparable from pig flow.

Delays, bottlenecks, and irregular movement through the production system extend feeding periods without improving outcomes. Animals stay longer, eat more, and return less.

Maintaining flow discipline — even when conditions are challenging — prevents feed from being consumed simply because time has passed. It keeps feeding aligned with system intent rather than habit.

The human side of stopping

Knowing when to stop feeding is rarely limited by knowledge.

It is limited by:

- reluctance to make hard calls
- fear of appearing wasteful
- emotional attachment to animals or effort already invested
- discomfort with finality

These responses are human. They are also costly.

Recognising them as part of the system — rather than personal failure — allows farms to design decision points that reduce reliance on judgment under pressure.

Completing the feed efficiency system

Feed efficiency is not improved by a single intervention.

It emerges from:

- systems that prevent early losses
- routines that minimise daily waste
- environments that support digestion
- and decisions that protect feed investment at the end of the cycle

Stopping at the right time is as important as starting well.

Together, these elements determine whether feed becomes pork — or simply disappears into the system.

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
- **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 (*you are here*)