



What Pig Farms Often Miss — Even When Feed Is Expensive

Knowledge Note #1: Feed Wastage Is Rarely an Accident — It's Built Into the System

Feed is the single largest cost on most pig farms.

When prices rise, attention follows: rations are recalculated, feed budgets tightened, and purchasing decisions scrutinised. Yet despite this heightened focus, feed wastage often continues — quietly, consistently, and largely unnoticed.

This is not because farms do not care about efficiency.

It is because much of feed loss is **built into daily systems and routines**, rather than caused by obvious mistakes.

Much of the thinking in this Knowledge Note draws on long-term field experience from international pig consultants, including **John Carr**, whose work over several decades has focused on identifying where feed efficiency is quietly lost through everyday farm systems rather than single, visible failures. These insights are interpreted here through PigTalks' editorial lens, with the aim of making them practical, neutral and applicable across different production contexts.

Feed wastage is rarely one big failure

When farmers think about feed wastage, they often imagine visible losses: spilt feed on the floor, feed blown away during delivery, or feed rejected by pigs. These losses do occur — but they usually account for only a small part of the total picture.

In practice, feed wastage is more often the result of **many small, repeated losses**, each considered too minor to matter on its own. A little feed left overnight in a feeder. A short feed outage that “won’t do much harm”. A slightly overfilled feeder before the weekend. A sick pig that keeps eating but never really grows.

Individually, these events feel insignificant.

Collectively, they can decide whether a farm makes or loses money.

Why expensive feed does not automatically reduce wastage

It is tempting to assume that high feed prices naturally lead to tighter management. In reality, higher prices can sometimes increase pressure — and pressure can reinforce habits rather than change them.

When stockpeople are busy, understaffed, or focused on avoiding visible problems such as hungry pigs or uneven pens, decisions are often made for **convenience and risk avoidance**, not efficiency. Overfilling feeders feels safer than underfilling them. Feeding extra before weekends feels easier than careful daily adjustment. Keeping animals on feed “a little longer” feels kinder than making hard decisions.

These choices are understandable.

But they also allow feed loss to become routine.

The difference between feed used and feed converted

One of the most important — and often overlooked — distinctions on pig farms is the difference between:

- **Feed delivered or used**, and
- **Feed actually converted into pig growth**

Feed usage is relatively easy to measure. Conversion is not.

Feed that ends up spoiled by moisture, eaten by rodents or birds, dropped between feeder and drinker, poorly digested due to stress or disease, or consumed by animals that will never reach market, is still recorded as “used”. But it never contributes to performance.

This is why farms can appear well managed on paper, yet still struggle with high production costs.

Feed loss happens along the entire system

Feed wastage does not occur at a single point.

It accumulates **along the entire production chain** — from delivery and storage, through feeding systems and daily routines, and finally inside the pig itself.

Because losses are spread out, responsibility is also spread out. No single person feels accountable for the total outcome. Each step seems minor. The system continues unchanged.

Over time, this normalisation of small losses becomes one of the most expensive features of the farm.

Seeing feed wastage as a system problem

The first step to reducing feed wastage is not changing equipment, diets, or suppliers. It is changing how the problem is understood.

Feed loss is rarely the result of carelessness or ignorance. More often, it reflects systems designed for convenience rather than precision, routines inherited and never questioned, and a lack of visibility over where losses actually occur.

Once feed wastage is seen as **systemic**, rather than accidental, it becomes possible to address it without blame — and without disrupting the entire operation.

This Knowledge Note series looks at where feed loss commonly occurs, why it persists, and how everyday decisions quietly shape feed efficiency. Not to criticise farms, but to make visible what is often hidden in plain sight.

Because when feed is expensive, what farms miss matters more than ever.

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 (*you are here*)
- **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