



Boars heading for 2018

Boars 5 years underway

The topic of the castration of male piglets has grown in importance in the last decade and a half. The complexity of the subject turned out to be an enormous challenge for all those concerned. Not only did it involve many different parties in the production chain, but the practical aspects also turned out to be extremely complex and multi-faceted.

The success achieved is due in no small part to the willingness of all the links in the production chain to work together towards the same goal, their enthusiasm and determination to find solutions. Another important factor was that funding for research was granted for a number of years, ensuring continuity. The steering committee took nothing for granted. They were open to criticism and invited other researchers to check their work.

Over the years, all the links in the pork production chain contributed, financially and in other ways, to making the campaign a success. It was not easy for any of them. They often had to invest large amounts of time and energy in winning over their rank-and-file. But throughout, all the members remained open with each other. Mutual trust meant that differences could be overcome.

The lesson that can be learned from this is that if you want something really badly, you will succeed if you work together. Solutions everyone can accept can be found and they will even bring plaudits from consumers too.

How it all came about:

1997/1998

An outbreak of swine fever in the Netherlands had far-reaching consequences and convulsed the nation. The outbreak led to the first ever direct contact between the Dutch animal welfare organisation *Dierenbescherming* and the pig farming division of the Dutch farmers' organisation, LTO.

2000

The pig sector conducted exploratory talks with various stakeholders that included the topic of 'castrating pigs'. A working party came up with a wide range of possible solutions, from breeding and sperm sexing to animal housing. Martin Houben, the chairman of the pig farming division of one of the regional farmers' organisations, LLTB, Peter Vingerling and Bert van den Berg of the Dutch animal welfare organisation were the initiators and driving forces behind this.

The issue was not confined to the Netherlands; it was a hot topic in Switzerland too. Dutch and Swiss researchers exchanged information for the first time.

2003

The pig farming division of the LTO and the animal welfare organisation once again raised the subject of banning castration, stating that the European dimension was an important condition for success.

The Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Cees Veerman, emphasised corporate social responsibility in his vision statement. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries put the subject of castration on the European agenda.

2004

A working party was set up featuring representatives from the pig farming division of the LTO, the Dutch animal welfare organisation, vets, the animal feed industry and slaughterhouses all acting in a private capacity. The working party initiated a 'pressure cooker procedure' in order to examine all the relevant aspects of the castration issue in depth and to arrive at recommendations in a limited number of sessions. This work was conducted in a private capacity and in secrecy as castration was still a sensitive issue in the pig farming sector.



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The working party explored alternatives to castration without anaesthetic and listed two important conditions: international market acceptance and a good detection method for boar taint.

2005

The working party presented its report 'Boars heading for the future' in January 2005, at a mini-symposium at the Ministry of Agriculture, arguing in favour of a Europe-wide solution and announcing that it expected a form of market acceptance to have developed by 2009. The working party proposed to the government that anaesthetised castration become an option as of 2006. A pilot project was to demonstrate whether anaesthetised castration offered the hope of a temporary solution and whether this was feasible.

The working party asked a number of important stakeholders from the pig sector whether they could identify with the report and whether they wished to cooperate in achieving the recommendations. They responded positively. A few wished to contribute effectively and join the working party.

2006

In September, the European Commission announced it wished to organise a symposium on castration, which finally took place in January 2007. Celia Steegmann of the Ministry of Agriculture represented the Netherlands. Most European countries at the symposium demonstrated little faith in a national approach to castration.

On 18 October, Annechien ten Have, Chair of the pig farming division of LTO sent an incendiary opinion piece to the media. She emphasised that pig farmers wished to stop castration, but also alluded to the complex problems involved. The two biggest obstacles: market acceptance in the EU and a method for measuring boar taint.

In November, Annechien ten Have and Han Swinkels represented the LTO at a meeting of the European umbrella organisation for agriculture, Copa-Cogeca. They were astounded: the castration issue turned out to be only a concern in Belgium and the Netherlands. It was never mentioned in the UK as no castration takes place there and it was a non-issue for all the other European countries.

Annechien ten Have gave a presentation on the situation in the Netherlands. She proposed working towards non-castration on a voluntary basis. This was a bridge too far. The proposal to ban castration by law in the EU as of 2009 was voted down by the majority. The umbrella organisation decided a study had to be conducted into boar management and boar taint detection methods. The Dutch working party elected to join this research

process. The general expectation was that castration would not be on the European agenda in the foreseeable future.

2007

The castration issue gained momentum in the Netherlands in 2007. Producers' organisation De Hoeve started supplying pork with the environmental quality label *Milieukeur*. Hans Verhoeven initiated the sustainable pork supply chain, KDV. KDV had short lines and comprised pig farmers, butchers and supermarkets as well as hotel, restaurant and catering companies. The carcasses of male pigs were burned with a soldering iron to see if the smell of boar taint could be detected. KDV pig farmers were the first to supply boar meat to some 100 independent, certified butchers and the CoopCodis supermarket chain. Many feared this would go wrong.

Later that year, Pfizer gave a presentation to the 'Stop castration' working party on immunocastration as an alternative to castration. The vaccine is used in Australia. The Dutch Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries invited government bodies and sector parties from Belgium and Germany to visit the Pig Innovation Centre (VIC) in Sterksel, the Netherlands. Pig castration was on the agenda.

In early March, the working party contacted Denmark in an attempt to obtain information about their methods for detecting boar taint. The attempts failed.

The Belgian animal welfare organisation, Gaia, started a tough anti-castration campaign.

On 21 March, LTO's pig farming division announced that pig farmers wished to end castration. It referred to trials with anaesthetised castration and called for an end to castration in the long term. The message emphasised the European dimension.

On 1 June, the Dutch Food Retail Association, CBL, issued a press release announcing that, as of 1 January 2009, supermarket organisations would amend their purchasing terms and would only buy pork from uncastrated pigs or those castrated using anaesthesia.

On 26 June, Copa-Cogeca asked for financial support from the European Commission for a European research programme. Copa did not think it was realistic to stop castration in the EU in the short term (2009).

The Dutch House of Representatives discussed the issue during the budget debate. The D66 party stated that there were alternatives for stopping castration in the short term. Annechien ten Have's public response was loud and clear.



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"If that was the case, castration would have ceased long ago and we would have had European agreements by now. There is no readymade solution. This isn't something you solve 'with some extra money'."

Kees Oomen, Director at the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Fisheries, sent a text message to Annechien ten Have who was present at the public gallery. In response to questions from the Dutch animal welfare party, *Partij van de Dieren* she was urged to agree to anaesthetised castration as an intermediate solution during the debate.

The Agriculture Minister, Cees Veerman promised in the House of Representatives that a solution to the castration issue would be worked on. The Ministry and the Dutch Product Board for Livestock, Meat and Eggs both made 500,000 euros available for research since the connection between boar taint and breeding was still unclear.

The working party asked two experts, Dutchman Pim Brascamp and the Norwegian John Erik Haugen to conduct a quick scan of the Dutch research plan. Both issued positive reports.

The EU started the European research project PIGCAS in which Wageningen University and Research Centre was to be an important player.

Frank Dales became the new Director of the Dutch animal welfare organisation *Dierenbescherming*.

The EU asked PIGCAS to organise an international stakeholders' conference about the castration issue. The working party wanted the Netherlands to host it and so Wageningen University and Research Centre organised the conference that took place on 29 November in Noordwijk. This became the Big Day when Theo Roos, the Director of the Dutch Food Retail Association CBL, Siem Korver on behalf of the Dutch Meat Association COV, Annechien ten Have of the LTO pig farming division and Wyno Zwanenburg of the Dutch union of pig farmers NVV signed the Noordwijk Declaration. The Minister of Agriculture, Nature Management and Food Quality, Gerda Verburg, and Frank Dales the Director of *Dierenbescherming* signed the declaration as supporters. Unilever the Netherlands also signed to show its support. All those involved announced their ambition to stop castration entirely in the Netherlands in 2015.

European researchers began exchanging increasing amounts of information thanks to an initiative by Wageningen University and Research Centre.

At the end of 2007, Euro parliamentarian Jan Mulder took up the issue. He put his weight behind European research to be funded by the EU. Mulder amended the EU budget with a pilot project on animal-friendly livestock farming. A request was submitted for one million euros for research into a standard detection method for boar taint. Although acknowledging that the sum would not provide a total solution, Mulder argued for a contribution from Europe. The European Parliament approved the pilot.

2008

The rapid developments in 2007 continued in 2008. Momentum had been achieved.

The signatories of the Noordwijk Declaration met straight away agreeing to set up a multi-year research programme with the aim of developing a practical method of anaesthesia. The study into CO₂ anaesthesiology started in January. The working party asked research project leader Gé Backus to be the main driving force behind the project. In mid-2008, an extensive research proposal was submitted with the aim of learning more about the complex castration issue.

Project members worked intensely to develop the anaesthesiology method. Sometimes the opinions and interests of supermarkets, slaughterhouses, pig farmers and animal welfare organisations seemed diametrically opposed. The investment costs for the equipment required for anaesthetised castration were a contentious issue and became the subject of talks between the Dutch Food Retail Association CBL and the working party. The anaesthesiology equipment was estimated to cost well over three million euros. The parties could not agree on who would have to pay for this, but continued their dialogue. The will to find a solution was clearly present.

The Dutch animal welfare organisation together with the supermarket organisations Plus and Super de Boer visited their German pork supplier Tönnies to discuss the demand for anaesthetised castration. Tönnies expected the next demand to be to cease castration altogether and said it was prepared to implement this. The largest German slaughterhouse had therefore changed its mind but was only prepared to sell the boar meat in the Netherlands, not in Germany.

The German animal welfare organisation *Tierschutzbund* started an anti-castration campaign which also put the subject on the agenda of our important trading partner Germany.

On 28 May, a delegation from the European Parliament visited the Netherlands to gather information about the castration issue.



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The weekend before the annual CBL conference, Annechien ten Have and Wyno Zwanenburg decided that LTO Nederland and another farmers' organisation, the NVV, would demonstrate outside the head offices of supermarket chains Albert Heijn and C1000. Armed with two orange balls, the pig farmers called on the supermarkets to make a financial contribution to the intermediate solution of anaesthetised castration they so desired. Pig farmers were of the opinion that the supermarkets should join the government and the product board in investing in the cost of anaesthetised castration. At the CBL conference, its chairman Dick Boer promised three million euros. The supermarkets announced that, as of 1 January 2009, they would only sell fresh pork from pigs that had been anaesthetised during castration. They said they would be prepared to pay more for it.

The pig farming industry sped things up. In September and October, the majority of the pig farmers took a course on how to castrate their piglets using anaesthesia. The certificate of participation is a precondition for receiving compensation for anaesthesia.

There were many practical problems, ranging from the supply of gas to discussions with German scientists who criticised the method developed in the Netherlands. The CBL set a new date for anaesthetised castration to replace all other methods: 1 March 2009. The Dutch pig farming industry was ready to go.

In December, the LTO contacted the Belgian farmers' union, with the objective of starting to work together on the European process to Stop Castration.

The Ministry and the product board made five million euros available for a five-year research programme. The long duration would lend continuity to the issue. The research was to be supervised by a steering committee and the working party was disbanded. The steering committee consisted of the financiers, representatives from the primary sector, the meat processing industry and Dutch animal welfare organisation. Annechien ten Have became its chairperson, while Gé Backus was appointed secretary and coordinator of the research project.

2009

As of 2009 anaesthetised castration became a reality throughout the Netherlands.

At the request of the Dutch and German quality system organisations, IKB and QS, project leader Gé Backus and the chairman of the Dutch Royal Society of Veterinarians, Ludo Hellebrekers, organised a debate between Dutch and German

scientists on the welfare aspects of the various anaesthesia methods. No objective criteria were known to exist to measure the effect of the various methods on animal welfare. IKB and QS accepted each other's methods, enabling Dutch pig farmers to continue to export their piglets to Germany.

In early 2009, another Dutch animal welfare organisation, *Wakker Dier*, started a campaign against castration. LTO and the VION Food Group responded by pointing out to the organisation that the campaign had no basis in fact. *Wakker Dier* cooperated constructively and agreed that the campaign was unnecessary. The organisation withdrew its radio advertisement and modified its press release.

Albert Heijn, VION Food Group and the animal welfare organisation *Dierenbescherming* agreed to produce one-star pork for all Albert Heijn supermarkets. One of the criteria was that the meat had to be sourced from uncastrated pigs. Albert Heijn raised the standard for all its pork to at least one star. This substantially increased demand in the Netherlands for meat from uncastrated pigs.

The steering committee focused on its research with renewed energy and identified four areas of attention.

- Breeding
- Boar management
- Detection method
- Market acceptance and consumer behaviour

As the research progressed, knowledge increased by leaps and bounds, but also gave rise to new questions. The steering committee decided to look abroad, and found that researchers in many places were working on the same subject. Project leader Gé Backus set up an international research network to exchange information.

Pressure from animal welfare organisations increased in Germany too. Two years after the Noordwijk Declaration, Germany followed suit with the Düsseldorf Declaration. The signatories stated their ambition to stop castrating pigs in 2017.

Later on, large agricultural umbrella organisations in France were also discovered to have been working on a solution to the castration issue. The European Commission in Brussels had by then also become convinced that something should be done at a European level.

2010

Andrea Gavinelli, the head of the animal welfare department at DG Sanco, part of the European Commission in Brussels, organised a European meeting. The response from the member



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states differed considerably from that in 2007. At the close of the meeting, Gavinelli proposed drawing up a Brussels Declaration. Almost without exception, the response from the member states was positive.

The participants argued in favour of voluntary introduction and against regulation. The parties emphatically wished to use the market to solve the issue. Their ambition was to practice nothing other than anaesthetised castration in 2013 and to end castration throughout the EU in 2018. The castration issue had become a European issue.

In the Netherlands, the first 'starred' meat went on sale on a large scale as of December 2010.

2011

The Dutch research programme was moving at full speed. The steering committee decided to have their results evaluated. French researcher Michel Bonneau and Spanish researcher Maria Angels Oliver reviewed the Dutch research. They recommended prioritising consumer and detection research in the second phase. Bonneau in particular was sceptical about the detection method utilised: the human nose. Both researchers gathered information about the method as used in practice.

The Stop Castration steering committee found that developments in the Netherlands were proceeding rapidly, but that those in other countries lagged behind. The group suspected that this was due to lack of knowledge on the issue and that, furthermore, there was no pan-European coordination. They decided to organise an international conference to bring the parties together, to exchange information and to seek a new path together. The conference took place in Amsterdam in early December and was a great success. DG Sanco announced a follow-up conference in 2012 in Brussels.

2012

In the Netherlands all the parties had become convinced of the huge complexity of the castration issue, the importance of European market acceptance and of the development of good, fool-proof detection methods. The business community and researchers worked together in a unique, open relationship on the castration issue. Mutual trust was considerable.

Breeding organisation Topigs and researchers from Wageningen University and Research Centre collaborated on the challenging breeding issues. Using the Nador concept, it proved possible to select terminal sires whose offspring have 40% less risk of boar taint. Even if it were to take years, there seemed to be light at the end of the tunnel.

Wageningen University and Research Centre started a pilot at 70 pig farms.

Researchers from Wageningen University and Research Centre and VION Food Group staff cooperated closely on the development of a human nose detection method. Data was collected from more than a million pigs and analysed. Human noses proved to be the best way of discerning boar taint. Slaughterhouse staff received special training and the method proved to work well.

An increasing number of Dutch pig farmers had stopped castrating their male piglets. The percentage increased from 5% in 2010 to 45% in 2011.

The meat processing industry came up against barriers, as the international market would only partially accept meat from uncastrated pigs or only at considerable discounts. VION Food Group reported that the Dutch boar market was full and awaiting changing market conditions.

In September, the largest French pork products group Cooperl Arc Atlantique announced that it would stop castration as of March 2013. The group has a 20% market share. French pig farmers had recognised the advantages of improved animal welfare and yields.

On 17 December, the stakeholders – who had gathered together at the initiative of the European Commission in Brussels – decided to set up a Taskforce that was to take the issue to the next phase in Europe. One of the biggest barriers they were facing was market acceptance in the various European countries.

2013

In 2013, the website www.boars2018.com was revived to provide multilingual information on all manner of themes surrounding stopping the castration of boars. It gained a large number of subscribers in no time at all.

The protocol for the human nose detection method was included in the German QS quality management system. Companies in the Netherlands can have their method certified by VERIN.

In April, the Dutch steering committee invited Dutch and European journalists to hear about the current state of affairs with regard to the issue. Andrea Gavinelli of the European Commission in Brussels attended part of the programme. Gavinelli reported that DG Sanco would appoint a member of staff to move the project forward in Europe.



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On 24 May, the Dutch Foodstuffs Trade Organisation posted a message which referred to the fact that Dutch supermarkets would no longer sell meat from castrated pigs as of 1 January 2014. This meant that the Netherlands was a year ahead of the previously agreed target.

The European Taskforce met in June. DG Sanco wanted to facilitate the process, but will leave its implementation to European market parties. Those present appointed a number of expert groups; Gé Backus and Annechien ten Have are members of three of the four groups.

In November, the Dutch steering committee announced the results of its large-scale study into boar management. The results once again confirmed the complexity of non-castration, but also underlined that boars can be raised successfully. Wageningen University and Research Centre gave feed

manufacturers, slaughterhouse workers and veterinary staff suggestions for solving potential problems encountered by pig farmers.

At the end of November, it was five years since the Noordwijk Declaration was signed. Its objective had been achieved in the Dutch market a year before the date agreed.

In Europe, boars have five more years to go until 2018. The Netherlands are in front. Problems at pig farms can be solved and a detection method has been developed in order to be able to continue to guarantee excellent meat quality. European market acceptance remains a major stumbling block, however, which is delaying progress in the Netherlands.

'Boars heading for 2018' has been underway for five years. The Netherlands is ready. Now for Europe.