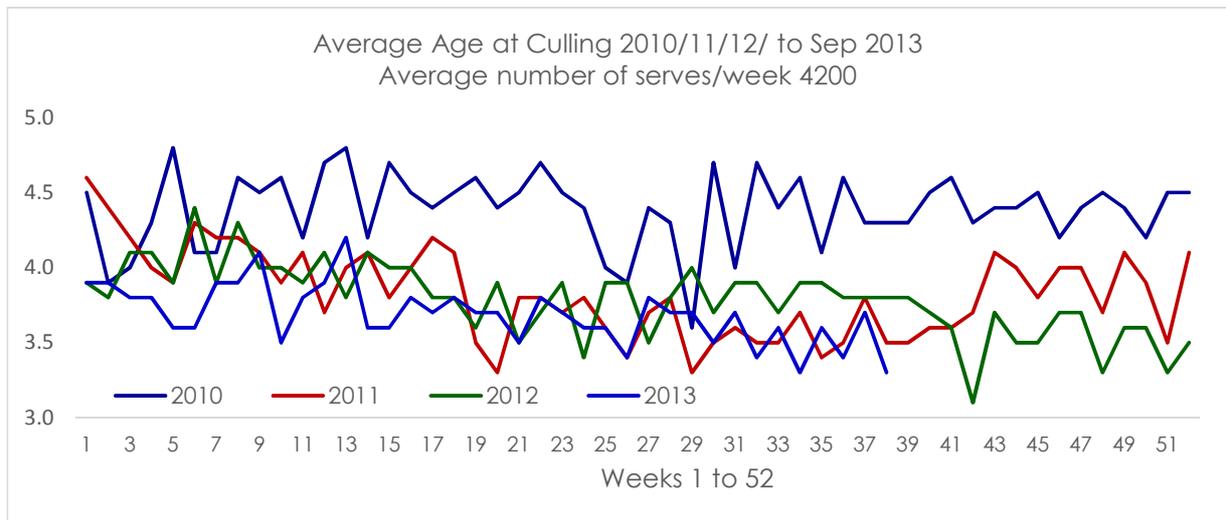


If the industry is to move towards a right balance between management and support there are two areas of supply that need deep consideration. Genetics and nutrition. The industry is indebted to those entrepreneurial spirits who many years ago took on the evolutionary management of the porcine gene pool. Based on the UK herd size suggested in the previous column the industry needs almost 240K replacement gilts for producing the slaughter generation. How many readers baulked at this because it represents a 60% replacement rate. For many years the replacement figure has been believed to be 45 to 50% with the breeding herd turnover a little over two years. One of the characteristics of top performing farms is their elevated replacement rate of anything between 60 and 70%. The reason for the suggestion of 60% replacement for the UK herd is that the calculation is based on the average age at culling in the UK which is approximately 4 parities. The predicted Litters/Sow/Year (L/S/Y) was a generous 2.38 making the herd turnover 1.68 years, a rate of 59.5%. To get down to a rate of 50% when culling at an average of 4 parities L/S/Y would obviously need to be just 2.0. The UK all farms L/S/Y average for 2013 is 2.29 and the replacement rate is 53.3% which suggests that the average culling age is 4.3 parities.

Table 1



In table 1 it is clear that the average age at culling in the sample is reducing and this will equate to a rising replacement rate. The BPEX figures for the year end replacement rate for the previous 4 years confirm this as follows; 2009 - 48.18%...2010 - 49.25%....2011 - 50.73%...2012 - 52.42%. This is an increase of 5% over the 5 years. Table 1 does not indicate a current average age at culling of 4.3 for 2013, year to date September, it is nearer to 3.7. Further analysis reveals that around 30% of culls in the UK are in the first two parity's and well over 50% of culls occur before parity 5.

In the previous column it was established that the parity distribution for the reference population representing the equivalent of the UK herd is P1 to P5, in this herd with the average age at culling at 3.7 and the L/S/Y at 2.29 the replacement rate would be 62.1% that is 8.8% more than the current BPEX reported figure.

The industry faces a management challenge, it is the replacement gilt. Producers need to be able to identify the causes of such a high culling rate of these valuable replacements in order to get the benefits of the years of work of their genetic suppliers. A business specific management strategy should be agreed between the producer and the suppliers of genetics and nutrition in

order to address the current trend which treats replacement gilts as cannon fodder. The industry also needs to consider re-classifying the gilt to the point in her development when she becomes a sow. This is a point somewhere in her second parity, possibly as late as her P2 farrowing or weaning, until then she is still maturing physically. Those entrepreneurial spirits wrested the important responsibility of the ownership of the development of the gilt from producers and in doing so they gave us back a more prolific animal. Animals like the foundational dam-line Landrace are today almost unrecognizable from their forebears, they need a new understanding in terms of management. It is an understanding that can only be gained from the responsibility of ownership in the unique environment of each production business. Ownership in terms of range, from operating bespoke supported genetic programs within herd to tailored supply from a multiplication source. It is an understanding necessary for the industry to be able to get the very best from the high level of nutritional expertise available. Producer responsibility towards gilt development, appropriately fed, through to the completion of parity 2 will address the current trend which seems to indicate that any (very necessary) increase in the replacement rate will simply lead to an increase in young animals being culled rather than an increase in the efficiency of the UK herd. This in turn will enable our geneticists to concentrate their skills more towards product quality in the knowledge that their current achievements in product quantity are in safe hands.

Stephen Hall 15/04/14