SUPPORTING NURSERY PIGS DURING PRRS CHALLENGES: A LOOK AT NUTRITIONAL STRATEGIES

Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS) continues to be one of the most economically significant diseases in swine production. While it's widely known for its impact on reproduction in sows, the nursery phase is also a vulnerable period where respiratory signs and slowed performance may surface—especially in the presence of co-infections or environmental stress.

What is PRRS?

PRRS is a viral disease with two main clinical presentations: reproductive failure in breeding animals and respiratory disease in pigs of any age. In nursery pigs, it can present as fever, lethargy, decreased appetite, respiratory distress (such as "thumping"), and slower growth.

The virus spreads through various routes including nasal, oral, and even vertical transmission. Once introduced, PRRS can persist in a herd, contributing to recurring health and productivity challenges.

Why the Nursery Phase Matters

The post-weaning period already places stress on a young pig's immune and digestive systems. When compounded by PRRS, pigs may face additional challenges maintaining intake and growth. Seasonal shifts, temperature swings, and co-infections like swine influenza virus (SIV) or mycoplasma can further complicate the picture.

In such cases, the goal becomes supporting pigs through the challenge—keeping them eating, minimizing setbacks, and helping them stay on track for long-term performance.

Exploring Nutritional Support

Producers and nutritionists have explored a variety of strategies to help pigs through the nursery phase. One area of focus is the use of functional proteins, such as plasma, in nursery feed.

Plasma contains a mix of bioactive components including immunoglobulins and peptides. These ingredients are widely studied for their potential to support gut health, immune system function, and feed intake during stressful periods.

What Research Suggests

In research settings, nursery pigs exposed to PRRS and fed diets containing plasma have demonstrated:

- Higher average body weights by day 7 and day 21 compared to pigs fed alternative diets
- Lower observed mortality in some studies, with fewer losses noted in the group receiving plasma
- Improved economic outcomes, with one trial estimating an average return of $2.40 more per pig when plasma was included in the diet

While individual farm results may vary, these findings suggest that plasma may be a valuable nutritional tool when included in nursery diets during times of respiratory disease pressure.

A Proactive Approach

Rather than waiting for visible setbacks, some producers choose to incorporate plasma functional proteins proactively, as part of their regular nursery feeding program. By doing so, pigs maintain resilience during expected stress periods, including seasonal changes or potential health risks.

Final Thoughts

PRRS remains a complex and costly challenge in swine production. But nutritional strategies—particularly those focused on immune and digestive support—can play a role in helping pigs through difficult periods. While no single strategy can completely eliminate the impacts of PRRS, plasma-based functional proteins offer another layer of support for young pigs when it matters most.

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