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Amendment is final straw for pig farmer

One of the two farmers affected by the pig-crate amendment has sold his sows for slaughter.

By WES ALLISON, Times Staff Writer

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The idea was to make pigs at farms like Henry Mathis' more comfortable.

Instead, they're being turned into sausage.

Rather than comply with the new constitutional amendment requiring larger crates for pregnant pigs, the Dade City hog grower has shipped his sows to the slaughterhouse.

Mathis, one of just two farmers in Florida affected by the new law, said the cost of retrofitting his operation far outweighs the benefit, especially with pork prices in a persistent slump.

He's quitting the business. The other farmer is considering selling his pigs for slaughter and quitting, too.

"It's just too much for us," Mathis said. "We raised pigs the right way, without psychological or traumatic harm, but the animal rights people said differently."

Hog farmers keep sows for breeding, to make more hogs they can raise and sell. Typically, sows are kept for two to three years before being sent to slaughter, time enough to deliver five or six litters.

On election day, Mathis had about 250 sows that would be covered by the amendment, which requires keeping pregnant pigs in pens large enough for them to turn around. Most major hog operations keep sows in a standard gestation crate, a 2- by 7-foot cage with a concrete floor where they can be easily tended.

During the past six weeks, Mathis has sold all his sows, ranging in age from 6 months to 2 years, for sausage. He also sold the other 2,000 hogs he was raising and doesn't plan to restock.

The other major Florida hog grower, Steve Basford of Grand Ridge in the Panhandle has about 300 sows on his farm.

Both are large farms by Florida standards but are tiny compared with the corporate hog operations that dot the South and Midwest. Even though the pregnant pig amendment includes a six-year grace period, Mathis and Basford said that conforming would cost at least \$150 per sow and that hardly would be

worth it.

Frankie Hall, assistant director of agricultural policy at the Florida Farm Bureau Federation, said the pork market has been glutted for the past 18 months, with most growers getting just 30 cents a pound.

They need at least 40 cents a pound to break even, and the prospects aren't good, he said.

"They're not going to put any more money into their hog operations to meet the guidelines to house their sows," Hall said.

"We've got an oversupply of meat on the market right now, and it's going to be awful tough to eat our way through it all."

Mathis, 59, began raising hogs in 1994. He also raises beef cattle, and plans to expand that end of his business. Basford hasn't decided what to do.

Hall, Mathis and Basford say gestation crates are the most humane way to raise sows. If you put them together in a pen, they scrap over food and suffer more health problems.

"They just don't do as well," Basford said. "They fight each other, see. And the efficiency of the operation goes down. And then when you look across the border -- in Alabama and Georgia and the rest of the country -- they can use these crates, so you're at a competitive disadvantage."

Farmers complain their side was drowned out by the \$4-million ad blitz waged by animal rights activists. Their side, in turn, spent virtually nothing.

But don't look for sympathy from the animal rights groups that pushed for the ban. Running hog farms out of business and keeping new ones from coming to Florida is exactly what they were after.

"We think that's an excellent thing," said Mike Winikoff, spokesman for the Animal Rights Foundation of Florida. "And the fact that some of the pigs might get slaughtered earlier, in the big picture, we see that as a good thing. It's going to lessen their suffering and hasten the end of their miserable lives."

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