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Pig breeding technology could make bacon taste nicer more of the time

Sally Williams, Western Mail | Sep 21 2006

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A WELSH firm has signed a deal with the owners of Danish Bacon for [new technology](#) which could allow breeders to preselect the sex of piglets.

Female pigs are often preferable to male pigs as they taste better, and the new technology could allow litters to be skewed to produce more females instead of boars.

Male pigs' flavour is altered because of "boar taint", which can give pork an "off" smell.

Now a global deal has been signed between Welsh start-up [company](#) Ovasort and the owners of Danish Bacon to maximise the technology.

Ovasort, a company that originated at University of Bristol Veterinary School and is now based in Cardiff, aims to develop the world's first low-cost, high-volume sperm separation technology, to skew the pig litter in favour of females.



The company says the technology could dramatically improve the commercial efficiency of supplying young female pigs, called breeding gilts, to the pig [industry](#).

It would also result in fewer male piglets being born, reducing the requirements for castration or unnecessary slaughter.

Dr Ian Cumming, who works for Ovasort at Cardiff Medicentre, said the technology can pinpoint individual proteins that are sex-linked and sort them.

It has the potential for use in other livestock, such as beef cattle.

Dr Cumming said, "Instead of 50% males and 50% females, we have the technology to skew the figures to 75% females and 25% males.

"Levels of protein detection are now a million times more sensitive, which means that the Ovasort technology can be exploited successfully not only in pigs, but also cattle and some other farm species on a low-cost high-volume basis.

"This will deliver a product that the farmer can afford and improve efficiency on the farm for pig breeders. We will shortly be seeking a partner for the cattle sector.

"It could reduce the number of unwanted male dairy cattle that have no real value and are sometimes slaughtered at birth.

"And the ratio of males could be boosted because they tend to have a higher weight than females and are more valuable.

"The ethics of sperm separation have been debated for around five years because the method is already used in livestock.

"It has the potential to make farmers much more competitive in the marketplace because they need less resources."

Ovasort has also just won a SMART Cymru Award from the Welsh Assembly Government for the commercial development of this potentially valuable new technology.

Dr Bob Wallis, the Welsh Assembly Government's bioscience sector manager, said, "The Ovasort approach to the discovery of new proteins at the cell surface could be decisive in confirming the existence of sex-linked surface proteins in sperm for the first time."

Sue Garbutt, from Builth Wells in Powys, a member of Wales and Border Counties Pig Breeders Association, said that although she can see the financial benefits of a female-skewed litter, she personally would rather rely on the natural method of pig breeding.

She said, "We keep pigs and I would prefer females to males because it has advantages.

"It can solve problems that arise as the pigs get older, because they start mating quite early.

"You have to keep the males separate from the females unless they are castrated.

"A lot of butchers won't take male meat unless they have been castrated and our local abattoir won't take males because of boar taint fears.

"The taste of the meat is very important.

"Most pig breeders I know in Wales are small scale and would not have a skilled operative performing artificial insemination."

Although bacon is not widely thought of as being healthy, it is now recognised as one of the least fatty meats, due to the rearing of leaner animals over recent years.

The meat is an excellent source of protein and contains several vitamins and minerals, including B12, B2, niacin, Vitamin D, Vitamin A, iron, zinc, selenium, copper and iron.

The technology will produce specific molecules, which bind together X-chromosome bearing (female) sperm cells, leaving unbound Y-chromosome (male) cells free to be filtered from the sample.

The separate populations of cells, skewed through filtering in a machine to produce a 3:1 ratio of females to males, are then placed into a conventional artificial insemination dose of sexed semen.