Colin and Joy Lienert, pig farmers at Lynjoleen Berkshire Stud, Sheoak Log, with all their show prizes. Picture: Matt Turner

CONSUMERS are demanding farmers change the way they treat animals - but that comes at a cost.

COLIN Lienert's pigs look happy. They come when called - "that's Bianca Bettina, and that boar there's Kruger". Colin gives them an affectionate scratch on their heads, raising a puff of dust. After all, these are pigs and the mud they've been rolling in has dried into a soft, brown coat. "A good pig has to have a good name, that's our policy," Lienert says as the pigs snuffle around the paddock with their pink, flat snouts and bent faces. These are berkshire pigs which, unlike the more common large white, have dark skin that protects them from the sun. The surprise for the city slicker is just how big they are - several hundred kilos apiece - and, most unexpectedly, their grey and intelligent eyes.

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The Lienerts have been breeding pigs since Colin, now 80, got his first by catching it in a greasy pig race back in 1955. He and wife Joy never looked back, even spending their honeymoon in Melbourne admiring them at the show. Now they still fill their days with pigs, which graze in paddocks, have a mud wallow for hot weather, and sleep in open-fronted stalls.

"Pigs, they are very intelligent animals," Colin says, the voice of experience. "For some reason you can train a pig that easily. They seem to be able to reason with humans. We sent a berkshire sow to Western Australia. And the deal was, the farmer could keep the litter but he had to return the sow. When she came back, it was a warmish day, she got off the truck, went out to the paddock where she was reared, went around the corner to the water trough and had a drink. After 18 months. She knew exactly where she was."

Smart and, more to the point, tasty. The berkshire's meat is marbled with fat, making it especially delicious. The Lienerts eat it regularly, and it hasn't done them any harm. They still run their 20-sow free-range farm near the Barossa Valley, selling the best pigs for breeding and others to specialty butchers.

I'm here to find out more about pigs, prompted by labels I've noticed on ham and bacon at the supermarket - "free-range", "cage-free" and "bred free-range". I know about free-range eggs and chicken, but it never occurred to me to think about how pigs are kept.

But a lot of people are doing exactly that as they weigh the enjoyment they get from animal products against the way they've been produced. Just 3 per cent of pigs come from free-range farms like the Lienerts'. They are rare in an era of intensive farming practices that maximise efficiency by keeping pigs indoors and, for at least some of the sow's pregnancy, in tightly-confined individual metal stalls.

Those sow stalls have been the focal point of a campaign for broader change. Animal rights campaigners led by Animals Australia are marshalling their forces, boosted by a $5 million cash injection from one of Australia's richest women, Kathmandu clothing chain founder Jan Cameron. The strategy is to influence consumers to demand change from industry. One front is the courts. Cases are in the pipeline to target food labels that mislead consumers about the way the animals have been raised. Another is an outdoor advertising campaign featuring farm animals in cages. Launched recently in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, the activists say it wasn't permitted to be shown in Perth and Brisbane.

Farmers condemn them as extreme, yet their tactics are working. Secret video of conditions at a Tasmanian and South Australian piggery obtained by activists in the past year were given prominent media treatment. They helped influence Tasmania to announce a staged ban on sow stalls, and to prompt retail giant Coles to require its Australian suppliers to end of the use of the stalls by 2014. Ten days ago, under pressure to respond, the pork industry announced it would get rid of the sow stalls by 2017.

But this debate won't only be about pigs, or stalls. Coles, which is battling Woolworths for market share, has sent a clear signal to farmers that animal welfare is a big issue - because consumers say so. Woolworths is already going down that track, with its pork supplier Rivalea, the nation's biggest producer, phasing out sow stalls by 2014. Coles cannot afford to fall behind. That means the battleground is likely to extend to other farm products. Coles has just decided to phase out cage eggs from its home brand.

Might it go further, and include bans on intensively farmed chicken meat? "We might," Coles's general manager of meat, Allister Watson, reveals. "We're talking to our suppliers. The biggest growing category that I look after is free-range chicken. The move away from normal chicken is enormous - and consumers are telling us they want to know the animals are treated better than they are at the moment. And we see the same growth in free-range and non-cage eggs. What we are looking at is what's good for the animals and what's good for the consumer ... And we can't wait for the industry bodies to catch up with consumer sentiment."

MOST of us know little about how animals are treated. Activists say we're oblivious to the conditions in which animals are farmed, but we are also blind in other ways. Our knowledge of animals - what they think and what they feel - is rudimentary. It has only been in the past 25 years that science has really tried to find out.

The move to free up the lives of the nation's pigs is only part of a broader story which has elements of concern for the environment, a healthy diet and a deeper understanding of what goes on in the animal brain. In 1926, American naturalist Henry Beston wrote of the need to have a wiser view of our companions in nature. "We patronise them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves," he wrote. "And therein we err and greatly err ... In a world far older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear."

Today, scientists are trying to hear those voices, and understand that world better. Our view of what constitutes humane treatment is evolving as science finds that, far from being dumb, animals to varying degrees can communicate, feel and think - rationally to solve complex problems and emotionally when they are stressed. This leads to uncomfortable ethical questions. Yes, animals must die if we are to eat them - but how must they live? Are they just units of production?

Pigs, says Professor Paul Hemsworth, who heads Melbourne University's Animal Welfare Science Centre and has conducted numerous studies into pig welfare (sometimes paid for by industry) rank with dogs, horses, and the non-human primates when it comes to problem solving. And our knowledge of animal intelligence? "That's been growing," he says, " ... as we get better at it, our ability to understand animal emotions will get much better."

So what, exactly, is all the fuss about? First, some numbers. There are about 255,000 breeding sows nationally, and only about 51,000 - according to industry body Australian Pork Limited - are not kept in stalls. Stalls are all about management: the sow can be individually fed, watered and monitored during pregnancy, safe from attack

by other pigs. It means sows might spend their entire productive life - 16-week cycles of gestation, feeding, then getting pregnant again - in a stall of some kind, never seeing sunlight or being able to move freely. The barred stall is supposed to be about 2.2m long by 600mm wide, just big enough (in theory) to stop the animal touching both sides, or both ends, at once. The floor is concrete. There's water and food at one end, and a channel at the back for dung.

Getting rid of the stalls, say farmers, makes sows vulnerable to attack by other pigs in the four to six weeks after they become pregnant, and to miscarriage. More than 60 per cent of pregnant sows are kept in stalls for one to six weeks, the industry says, and 20 per cent for longer - between six and 16 weeks.

Just what the pigs feel about this is disputed. Hemsworth says keeping pigs in stalls for the full pregnancy raises their stress hormone levels, but keeping them in for a few weeks causes "little difference in the stress hormones". He says a Canadian study showed sows voluntarily entered stalls for long periods when they had the choice between confinement and an open pen shared with other pigs.

But Lesley Rogers, an emeritus professor and animal behaviour expert from the University of New England, says long periods in stalls distresses pigs. Researchers from Scotland allowed pigs to go feral and discovered they formed friendships, going walking together in small groups. Separation from friends would be very stressful, Rogers says. "My own personal opinion is that no animal should be kept in that kind of confinement."

PIGS do have feelings, and suddenly in this large barn just outside Snowtown there's an eruption of anger and fear as several sows decide to attack another just to make sure she knows where she stands in the pecking order. Andrew Johnson is showing me around the old farm he's bought and worked hard to modernise. He has started looking at ways to reduce the need for the sow stalls. The farm is ramshackle but far better than it used to be: gone are the bits of sharp galvanized iron that could cut the animals as they moved between buildings, the roof leaks have been fixed, and the old stalls, so small they'd now be illegal, aren't being used. "It was cold, cramped and we said, 'we don't feel comfortable with it'. I thought, 'how would we feel on a five degree day lying in water (from a leaky roof)?'"

We pull on some overalls and gumboots and Johnson gives me the tour. There are areas where the pigs are confined in stalls, and it's a confronting sight. Johnson's innovation is to introduce pens where pregnant sows are able to move freely in groups rather than spending all of their pregnancy in the stalls. He just hasn't worked out what is the minimum period to keep them in the stalls before allowing them to mix. He's put a lot of back-breaking work into the site, but it's still a pig farm and - for those of us whose experience of pigs is limited to frying bacon - it's stinking and inevitably mucky.

Pigs, Johnson says, are hierarchical creatures and they will fight to establish ascendancy. His problem is that this fighting is causing miscarriages and his productivity is down. His family has three farms around the state, each with about 600 sows. "This one is losing money as a result of what we've done," he says bluntly. Margins are tight, he says, and the key number is how many pigs he can sell, per sow, per year. "That's the bottom line. We have to be achieving 21. It doesn't sound much, but one pig is the difference between being viable or not. Here we are looking at 16-17 and you will go broke at that."

The cost to his business is obvious from the empty farrowing crates that ideally would be full of the litters of 11 or so little pink blobs lying around on heated mats or nuzzling up to their giant mothers. They look like small footballs. Farrowing crates are steel stalls which confine a sow when she is about to give birth. They allow the piglets to suckle without being crushed, but the sow can't reach them. The piglets are taken at three to four weeks. Does that bother a sow? "I don't think anyone has looked at the distress in a sow," says Hemsworth.

Johnson shows me a couple of huge, temperature-controlled rooms where piglets are kept until they are ready to be shipped off for finishing at about 11 weeks (by 21 weeks, and at about 90kg, they'll be off to market). It's a disconcerting sight. There are hundreds of little pigs, all different sizes - scratched, pink, brown, spotted, ears up, ears down, all moving around in a pack. It looks like a giant pen of strange dogs.

Johnson had been one of the first to realise the Australian reliance on stalls would come under pressure. His report from a Nuffield scholarship overseas study tour in 2005 listed the "five freedoms" of animal welfare - freedom from hunger and thirst; from discomfort; pain, injury and disease; from fear and distress, and to express normal behaviour with access to sufficient space, facilities and the company of animals of its own kind. Plainly the sow stalls didn't do all that. While Johnson doesn't think there's one ideal solution, he favours a system that allows animals to voluntarily move in and out of their own stalls, where they can get food and water, and mix with other pigs when they choose in a straw-based "cafeteria" barn.

For the most part, Australian farmers like Johnson are producing fresh pork. Most of our ham and bacon is imported from intensive piggeries in the US, where sow-stalls are not limited, and the more regulated European farms, especially Denmark. Coles says these products will also have to be sow-stall free by 2014. "We have to be close to the consumer, we have to be proactive," says Johnson. "I don't think anyone in the industry foresaw the speed at which welfare has become an issue."

One person responsible for this is Lyn White, a former South Australian policewoman turned tenacious advocate for animals. White works with another long-time activist, Glenys Oogjes, at Animals Australia. Her unauthorised film of conditions at an unidentified SA piggery, plus other material from a Tasmanian piggery, went into a 60 Minutes program last December. (The SA piggery was not doing anything illegal, even though many viewers found the conditions upsetting). It was also White who first spoke with millionaire benefactor Jan Cameron after she had been alerted to the organisation's work by Melbourne billboards.

Both cases paid dividends for her cause. According to Coles's Allister Watson, the 60 Minutes show prompted a deluge of calls to his company - "the biggest number of complaints ever seen in the history of Coles". As for Cameron, she funded a TV ad campaign and then in mid-2010 announced she'd pay $1 million a year for five years to an Animal Justice Fund. A Barristers Animal Welfare Panel, with 125 lawyers nationwide, will fight cases for free. Cameron's cash means animal rights groups can afford to fight cases without fear of being crippled by an adverse costs decision if they lose.

White began a decade ago, aged 38, quitting the police to help fight against the practice of milking bears in Asia for their bile. "I realised it was hypocritical for Australians to be criticising the Chinese when they could walk into one of our factory farms and say, 'you're doing exactly the same thing for exactly the same reasons - to make money'," she says. White and Oogjes had hoped that lobbying politicians would lead to improved treatment of farm animals. It didn't. "Our politicians follow, they don't lead," she says. The alternative strategy has been to target public opinion, in the belief that many people would be appalled by modern farming practices if they knew what was involved.

"People think the battery cage issue has been fixed," says Oogjes, who heads the organisation. But she says the extra space provided per bird by recent law changes is minimal - "an increase from 450sq cm per bird to 550sq cm ... still under an A4 sheet of paper per bird". It is not just the lack of space, she argues, but "an impoverished, barren environment where they can hardly move, with no nest boxes, no pecking, no walking, their entire productive life, short as it is; about 18 months". The unwanted male chicks of the laying breed - an estimated 12 million a year - are thrown into a maceration machine or gassed, she says. Many end up as pet food. Maceration, the Australian Egg Corporation says, "is the quickest and kindest" method. However, Free Range Egg and Poultry Australia president Meg Parkinson says most farmers use carbon dioxide.

There has been a large switch to free-range eggs. Last year, the egg corporation says, 27 per cent of eggs were free-range, while in 2005 it was 14.5 per cent. Consumers are prepared to pay a premium. Perhaps that is part of the reason why the industry is now looking at changing the definition of free-range. The effect would be to have much more intensive farms. At present, the standard for a free-range farm is about 750-1500 hens per hectare, but the corporation, citing consumer research, argues people would accept 10,200 birds a hectare. It has been talking with farmers about up to 20,000.

Industry spokeswoman Jacqueline Baptista says no decisions have been made, but insists animal welfare won't be compromised. "No scientists and no egg producers have come back to me and said that if we wanted to increase stocking density it's a welfare issue," she says. Increase to what level though? "We haven't decided. It's why we are consulting with industry." Free-range farmer Parkinson says that larger bird numbers is not about welfare but the environment, since it would degrade the land very quickly.

The chicken meat industry is another target. "Fifty years ago it took 90 days to grow (a chicken) to 1.5kg; now it takes 37 days," says White. "They have managed to reduce it by selective breeding." The birds now grow so fast that she alleges that some cannot support their own weight. The high density sheds are also permitted to have 40kg of birds in a square metre - which, if the birds are 2kg apiece, is 20 per square metre. The industry scoffs at claims of poor treatment. But the free-range farmers limit their stocking to a maximum of 30kg a square metre, which is often less given the animals move out of the shed for some of the day.

White and Oogjes are hard liners. The pair are vegans and argue we'd be better off like them. "If you do eat meat, it is almost impossible to avoid the fact there is going to be suffering involved," says Oogjes. Even at the best practice farm? "It's impossible to know," she insists. As well, she argues, it is better for the environment and your health. The UN says meat production causes about 18 per cent of carbon emissions.

But the biggest issue driving consumer concern is the perception that the animals are treated badly. "We've passed laws that recognise we have a moral responsibility to protect animals from harm but we have excluded animals raised for food, and especially factory farmed animals," White points out. Each industry has a code of practice which may sanction treatment that would be illegal on a domestic pet. Yet the laws specifically exclude codes of practice from animal cruelty protections. "Piglets can have their tails cut through, their eye teeth clipped and their ears clipped without pain relief," Oogjes says. "If you did all those things to a dog you would be prosecuted for cruelty."

White says it's more than physical pain - it is the denial of natural behaviours. She targets the farrowing crate, that device which pens the sow while her piglets suckle. "A mother pig, even in a semi-natural environment, in the 24 hours prior to giving birth, will pull together twigs and make a nest. In a farrowing crate she has no option but to give birth in the same area where she toilets. I can't think of anything worse for a mother."

None of these arguments impress the country's largest pork producer, Rivalea, from NSW. Managing director Paul Pattison says the industry should be congratulated for tackling the issue. His company decided in 2007 to get rid of stalls for its 45,000 sows, but he says it was in no way an acknowledgement that the animals were ill-treated. "If you take the emotion out of the argument, the science says there are significant benefits out of a period in confinement for the sow," he argues. "Stress levels are lower. However, everybody else who gets emotional about these things ... à la the consumer, or the retailer who is pressured by the consumer ... doesn't want to understand the science and thinks just because they wouldn't like it that it's no good for the animal."

But Pattison says there's no point arguing because consumers will not change their minds. That's why his company is pushing ahead with systems that won't have stalls, except for the farrowing crates. Those, he says, are impossible to replace without big increases in piglet deaths. The fact that Rivalea has already moved about two-thirds of its sows out of stalls, and is still able to run a viable business, should give hope to farmers like Andrew Johnson still trying to make it work.

Still, moving pigs into the same free-range category as eggs and meat chicken is not going to happen soon. At present there are a small number of free-range piggeries and some who label themselves bred free-range. There are "a lot of labels that are deceiving the public, one of them being bred free-range, where the sows are outdoors but the progeny are indoors in buildings of one sort or another", says Pattison. "And it's marketed as bred free-range. The consumer thinks the meat they are eating was grown outdoors and it doesn't mean that at all. But true free-range ... where the pig was born, bred and reared outdoors, will cost you 25-30 per cent more to produce than the equivalent progeny grown indoors. So yes, there's a margin for that. Can you extract that? Generally not."

So consumers want it but won't pay for it? "Nope. Unless it is within 10 per cent of the generic product they can choose otherwise, they won't touch it."

In the great movement to cities, most people lost touch with animal production. Now, consumers are catching up with how it's done at a price they've been willing to pay, and the reality can be confronting. It was just such a story for Jonathan Safran Foer, the US author of best-selling book Eating Animals, who wrote how some of his greatest childhood memories revolved around his grandmother's chicken dish. In the end, he decided his conscience no longer allowed him to eat meat. "I love roasted chicken," he wrote. "I love a good steak. But I don't love them without limit."

Most people won't stop eating meat, but as ethical eating becomes a bigger issue, more are asking where their own limit lies.