

African Swine Fever, and Why It Matters

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If you haven't already, you may well be hearing more and more about a livestock disease known as African Swine Fever in the coming months. The first thing you may think is, "I don't raise swine, why should I care?" Well, if you enjoy your bacon, pork chops, holiday hams, just anything pork related, and you don't want to pay an extraordinary amount for it, you should care.

African Swine Fever (ASF) is first of all not a threat to human health. It can not be transmitted from pigs to people. However, it is a highly contagious and deadly viral disease affecting not only domestic pigs, but feral pigs as well. It spreads from animal to animal when pigs come in contact with infected animal's body fluids. It can be spread by ticks and humans can also facilitate the spread by carrying virus on vehicles or clothing, especially shoes.

The symptoms of ASF are similar to many other viral diseases including high fever, loss of appetite, weakness, red and blotchy skin lesions, etc. Unfortunately there is no cure for ASF. Most infected animals will die. There is no vaccine that is effective. When an animal is confirmed with ASF the standard protocol is to destroy the entire herd which often means all pigs on a farm and then an extensive decontamination and quarantine period before more pigs can be reintroduced to the farm.

ASF was first diagnosed in pigs in Africa in 1907. It apparently naturally inhabits warthogs and bushpigs and certain soft ticks, in sub-Saharan Africa, without any symptoms being detected. But any of these that are infected can then easily transmit the virus to domestic pigs or feral pigs (wild boars) if they come in contact with them. After being at a low level in Africa for decades, it was first detected outside of Africa in 1957 in Europe. It then has kept popping up around Europe off and on ever since, possibly staying present in wild boar herds. It has gotten as close to the US as certain Caribbean islands including Cuba. But it has yet to be detected in the United States.

Of more current concerns has been the discovery of ASF in East Asia and specifically China. China is a large consumer of pork products and its appetite for pork is increasing. Exact numbers of animals that have had to be euthanized is hard to know due to the politics at play but experts suspect that there has been some extensive depopulation occurring based on occasional large purchase of pork on the world market by China.

Pork production is big business in the USA. Annual pork production has been in excess of 115 million pigs in recent years with 2.2 million metric tons of pork products exported around the world. As I already said, many of us are quite fond of pork (bacon!!!) and the thought of it going up in price is a little unsettling. The most effective way, in fact the only way, to protect this valuable livestock and food resource is to keep the disease out of the country. If it were to get started in the USA, especially in any southern states where feral pigs are abundant, it becomes a nightmare to try to control it.

Most of us are not pork producers, but if we travel overseas, and happen to be around any domestic livestock, we need to be careful not to bring any disease back on our clothing. Follow the guidelines and proper declarations as you go through customs. I left a pair of shoes in Africa many years ago to reduce the risk of bringing any livestock disease back. Biosecurity is important and the threats are real. Pork is a 20 billion dollars a year business. Let's all work together to protect the business and our food supply!