



African Swine Fever

Position Paper
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Summary

The use of massive hunting of wild boar populations as a main approach to limit further spread of African Swine Fever (ASF) is considered inhumane and inefficient by Eurogroup for Animals. To successfully curb the spread of this disease, an unbiased, science-based approach and innovative solutions are needed. Research demonstrates that the focus must be on prevention and the strict application of biosecurity measures - benefiting animals, people and biodiversity.

Background

African Swine Fever (ASF) is a highly contagious and deadly viral disease affecting both domestic and feral swine. ASF is not a threat to human health and cannot be transmitted from pigs to humans. The virus causing ASF is a large double-stranded DNA Iridovirus of the Asfarviridae family. ASF virus owes its success to multiple factors: exceptional resistance to chemical and physical inactivation, a long period of viability in blood, tissues and faeces, and high virulence. In Europe, the transmission of the virus mostly occurs through direct contact of infected swine, although indirect contact of pigs and contaminated objects, such as farm equipment and feed, is also considered to play an important role¹. Research is still needed in several areas including the role of feed, water, and bedding in ASF transmission, as well as effective disinfectants for porous surfaces such as flooring and for carcass sites².

ASF is most often lethal to infected animals and spreads at a rapid rate through the herd. The most common clinical presentation is an acute haemorrhagic fever³. Due to the nature of the disease, its presence impacts the welfare of farmed and wild animals profoundly and is detrimental to economies.

ASF was first reported in the European Union in Lithuania, in January 2014 and quickly spread to Poland, Latvia and Estonia. Within five years, it was present in nine EU countries, and as of 2021, the EU is facing new concerns of the disease spreading to south-east Europe.

¹Cwynar, P., Stojkov, J., & Wlazlak, K. (2019). African Swine Fever Status in Europe. *Viruses*, 11(4), 310. <https://doi.org/10.3390/v11040310>

²Blome, S., Franzke, K., & Beer, M. (2020). African swine fever – A review of current knowledge. *Virus Research*, 287, 198099. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.virusres.2020.198099>

³Recognizing African Swine Fever A Field manual (2000) FAO Animal Health Manual No. 9

ASF is characterised by a high mortality rate in both pig and wild boar populations, and it severely impairs the welfare of the animals. Thousands of wild boars are hunted every year in Europe in the attempt to contain their number and the virus spreading⁴. In addition to the negative effects on the animals, science has shown that hunting boars to reduce the spread of ASF is not effective. Firstly, as indicated by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)⁵, ASF can occur both in areas of high and very low wild boar density. This indicates that reducing the density of wild boar is not a successful approach to curb the spread of the disease. Measuring the impact of hunting as a control measure is troublesome due to the fact that the density of the wild boar population can never be exactly evaluated. Second, EFSA mentions that a reduction of more than 67% of the wild boar population would be needed to stabilise the wild boar population. However, a reduction of more than 50% of the population has never been achieved, and there have been reports of population recoveries of up to 77% in the following year of implementing intensive hunting programmes.

Another important factor influencing the outcome of mass hunting is the common occurrence of breaches of biosecurity measures. DG SANTE⁶ reports that despite widespread awareness campaigns directed at hunters, biosecurity measures, a crucial element to ensure the effectiveness of the method, are not always respected during hunting. Since direct contact with blood is the most efficient route of transmission, but also indirect routes (vehicles, contaminated equipment including hunting gear, tools and clothing)⁷, this needs to be taken seriously.

Moreover, practices associated with intensive animal farming fuel the spread of infectious diseases⁸. High stocking density of animals sharing the same genotype, chronic stress resulting from substandard living conditions and long-distance transports negatively influence immune systems of the animals subject to these practices, facilitating pathogen transmission.

Eurogroup for Animals' position

Firstly, Eurogroup for Animals considers that human-mediated virus spread must be primarily addressed through awareness campaigns and other methods prioritising

⁴ EFSA AHAW Panel (EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Welfare), More S, Miranda MA, Bicoût D, Bøtner A, Butterworth A, Calistri P, Edwards S, Garin-Bastuji B, Good M, Michel V, Raj M, Saxmose Nielsen S, Sihvonen L, Spoolder H, Stegeman JA, Velarde A, Willeberg P, Winckler C, Depner K, Guberti V, Masiulis M, Olsevskis E, Satran P, Spiridon M, Thulke H-H, Vilrop A, Wozniakowski G, Bau A, Broglia A, Corfinas Abrahantes J, Dhollander S, Gogin A, Munoz Gajardo I, Verdonck F, Amato Land Gortazar Schmidt C, 2018. Scientific Opinion on the African swine fever in wild boar. EFSA Journal 2018;16(7):5344, 78 pp <https://doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2018.5344>

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Final report of an audit carried out in Latvia from 23 april 2018 to 27 april 2018 in order to evaluate the implementation of animal health controls in relation to african swine fever. (2018). https://ec.europa.eu/food/audits-analysis/act_getPDF.cfm?PDF_ID=14246

⁷ Friedrich-Loeffler-Institut (FLI): African Swine Fever. <https://www.fli.de/en/news/animal-disease-situation/african-swine-fever/>

⁸ Graham, J. P., Leibler, J. H., Price, L. B., Otte, J. M., Pfeiffer, D. U., Tiensin, T., & Silbergeld, E. K. (2008). The animal-human interface and infectious disease in industrial food animal production: rethinking biosecurity and biocontainment. Public health reports (Washington, D.C. : 1974), 123(3), 282-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003335490812300309>

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Eurogroup for Animals' position

Firstly, Eurogroup for Animals considers that human-mediated virus spread must be primarily addressed through awareness campaigns and other methods prioritising animal welfare. Behavior change and compliance with biosecurity measures are among the most important factors of success when combating the spread of ASF.

Second, we endorse the EFSA recommendation of keeping the wild boar population undisturbed within the core and buffer areas of infection throughout the period of active ASF transmission, and then adopting a full hunting ban - including other species to prevent stimulating wild boars' movement towards new areas. An artificial feeding ban can contribute to controlling the wild boar population in the long term.

Although it is evident that virus circulation in wild boar populations is an important factor in maintaining the presence of the disease within a certain area, mass hunting has proved to be "expensive, difficult and ineffective"⁹.

EFSA has also recently highlighted that compliance with on-farm biosecurity measures and refraining from hunting activities that could potentially aggravate the spread of the disease are key to reducing the risk of introducing ASF to outdoor pig farms or spreading the already present virus. Furthermore, EFSA also emphasised that ASF has been eradicated in Spain between 1985 and 1995 through improvements of biosecurity measures and construction of fences, which is in line with the current findings suggesting that single and double fencing would substantially reduce the risk of ASF outbreaks on these farms¹⁰.

Third, promising wild boar population control measures include the use of immunological contraception (GnRH GONACON). GnRH GONACON¹¹ has demonstrated promising

⁹ African swine fever virus eradication in Africa. Penrith ML, Vosloo W, Jori F, Bastos AD *Virus Res.* 2013 Apr; 173(1):228-46

¹⁰ EFSA AHAW Panel (EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Welfare), Nielsen, SS, Alvarez, J, Bicout, DJ, Calistri, P, Canali, E, Drewe, JA, Garin-Bastuji, B, Gonzales Rojas, JL, Gortázar Schmidt, C, Herskin, M, Michel, V, Miranda Chueca, MÁ, Padalino, B, Pasquali, P, Sihvonen, LH, Spoolder, H, Ståhl, K, Velarde, A, Viltrop, A, Winckler, C, De Clercq, K, Gubbins, S, Klement, E, Stegeman, JA, Antoniou, S-E, Aznar, I, Broglia, A, Papanikolaou, A, Van der Stede, Y, Zancanaro, G and Roberts, HC, 2021. Scientific Opinion on the assessment of the control measures for category A diseases of Animal Health Law: Foot and Mouth Disease. *EFSA Journal* 2021;19(6):6632, 85 pp. <https://doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2021.6632>

¹¹ Massei, Giovanna & Cowan, Dave & Coats, Julia & Bellamy, Fiona & Quay, Roger & Pietravalle, Stéphane & Brash, Matthew & Miller, Lowell. (2012). Long-term effects of immunocontraception on wild boar fertility, physiology and behaviour. *CSIRO Wildlife Research.* -. 10.1071/WR11196.

results to reduce the fertility of feral swine kept under experimental conditions with one single injection. The immunological contraception has been tested in a wild population of wild boars in Spain, with positive preliminary results. More research is needed to develop an oral vaccination which can be administered in a selective manner.

Fourth, preliminary research suggests that there may be effective vaccines against the virus available in the future¹². The priority should be given to confirming the safety and efficacy of these technologies in the field, accelerating transfer to the industry for official registration and commercialization.

We call on the EU to invest in research to obtain effective methods for fertility control of wild boars and an effective vaccine against the virus. Moreover, we emphasize that keeping animals in intensive farming systems hampers efforts to curb the spread of infectious diseases and for the same reason, we highlight the need to eliminate long-distance transport of live animals. Our position is in line with the EFSA's Scientific Opinion Concerning the Welfare of Animals during Transport¹³, stating that an overall strategy to prevent the spread of infectious diseases is to avoid live animal transport. In line with the Farm to Fork strategy, the EU should move away from intensive farming practices and end long distance transportation.

Combating the spread of African Swine Fever is a multidimensional feat and must encompass all risk areas. We recognize the importance of tackling this disease and we call upon the European Commission to support successful, evidence-based approaches that respect animal welfare and protect European citizens from economic loss.

¹² Sánchez, E. G., Pérez-Núñez, D., & Revilla, Y. (2019). Development of vaccines against African swine fever virus. *Virus Research*. doi:10.1016/j.virusres.2019.03.022

¹³ EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW); Scientific Opinion concerning the welfare of animals during transport. *EFSA Journal* 2011; 9(1):1966.[125 pp.]. doi:10.2903/j.efsa.2011.1966



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