

Belarus Kills Thousands of Pigs to Stop a Pandemic

On 21 June the Ministry of Agriculture of Belarus had to acknowledge that they detected African swine fever in a village of the Hrodna region. By August, it had spread to other regions of Belarus. This highly contagious disease causes up to a 100% mortality of livestock. Moreover, medics so far failed to develop an effective cure.

The Belarusian government had to take unprecedented measures to fight the outbreak such as killing livestock on large pig farms as well as in private households, causing popular discontent. For many rural families, breeding pigs has been an indispensable part of their households. People cannot understand why they have to kill all their pigs at once.

Neighbouring countries have banned meat imports from Belarus and introduced disinfection procedures on the border. But whether or not it will prevent the virus from spread to the EU remains unclear.

A Dangerous Virus

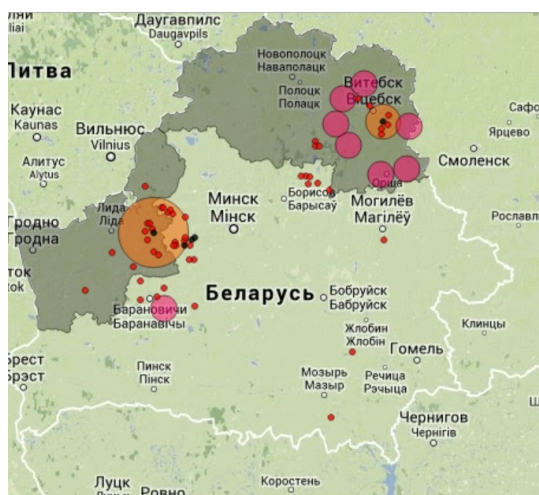
African swine fever is a highly contagious disease caused by a virus. It comes from Africa where it has existed in populations of wild pigs who have an immunity against it. However, when the infection reaches domesticated pigs, it is typical that all of them die from the virus. The fever emerged in Southern Europe and Latin America in 1960-1970s, causing vast losses of livestock.

Mortality from the disease varies from between 50 to 100%, but the virus does no harm to humans. So far no effective preventive measures and cure against the fever have been created. The only way to fight the disease remains the total elimination of the entire livestock population in question.

Virtually all of Europe and part of Russia is infected with African swine fever now and a whole branch of pig breeding is threatened throughout the region. The pandemic has inflicted great damage to farmers.

Fighting the Pandemic

In January 2012 the Ministry of Agriculture of Belarus issued a recommendation for local governments in Belarus to take additional measures to prevent the penetration of African swine fever from Russia. By that time, 22 Russian regions had detected the disease taking root. The Belarusian government banned the import of animal products from the infected regions, but despite this ban and other sanitary steps the pandemic broke out in June 2013 in the Hrodna region.



As it often happens in Belarus, the information on the outbreak came not from Belarusian official sources. On 21 June the Russian Service of Veterinary Surveillance announced this information, which it secretly received from Belarusian authorities. After that, Belarusian officials had no choice but to accept that the case of infection took root in one of the villages and the authorities did their best to prevent the spread of the disease.

According to the Belarusian Veterinary Service, African swine fever came to Belarus from abroad through animal fodder. On 4 July, authorities announced another outbreak of the disease in

the Vitsebsk region on the border with Russia and soon it appeared in the Minsk region too.

Authorities decided to strengthen control over pig farms and eliminate the whole population of pigs in the outbreak zones. The state guaranteed a reimbursement for losses incurred at a rate of \$2 for a kilogram of the live weight of an animal (while the market price of pork is about \$6). According to a governmental order, people in the infected areas cannot breed pigs for half a year.

A special regime was established on large infected farms to minimise the risk of spread of the pandemic. Near some farms, police posts appeared to make sure that no one could access the farms without permission.

Additionally, in some areas of Belarus, authorities ordered the complete elimination of wild boars who also serve as major disease carriers. For that purposes, authorities engage local hunters and allow them to shoot boars without hunting permission. All bodies are disinfected and buried in special pits.

Panic on Border

Meanwhile, neighbouring states attempt to build a line of defence from the Belarusian pandemic. Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia banned the import of animal products from Belarus.

Citizens who do not deal with pig breeding but who travel abroad and have experienced fever symptoms have to drive through a special carpet covered with a liquid antiviral. And special units on the border spray the liquid on the bottoms of vehicles. Moreover, all passengers exit their vehicles and clean their shoes on the carpet.



On 2 July the head of Lithuanian Veterinary Service called the situation with the African swine fever in Belarus “threatening and practically uncontrollable”. Poland and Lithuania have the longest borders with Belarus and appear particularly vulnerable to the penetration of the disease. They requested additional measures from the EU to defend the border: to set a fence on the border of Belarus to prevent the movement of wild boars, and build special facilities for chemical treatment of vehicles.

In response to that, the Belarusian Minister of Agriculture Michail Zajac claimed that, “there is no need to dramatise the situation, it is under control. We have some specific regions where the disease is, but all the necessary measures have been taken. Veterinary services’ work is well organised.”

In support of this claim, the Head of the Eastern European office of International Epizootic Bureau Kazimiras Lukauskas said that, “Belarus presents an example of how the government should act in such situation. We see great efforts being made by the Belarusian government and they want to study Belarusian experience of dealing with the fever and offer it to other countries”.

The Personal Tragedy of Villagers

In Belarusian villages, most households have at least one pig to support themselves financially. For them, the mass killing of pigs and the ban on their breeding in the near future has become a real tragedy. More often than not, the situation has

deteriorated because of the awkward actions of the local authorities.

This is how it happened in Stajki village, Minsk region:

Authorities gave us one day to kill our pigs. In order to do this, people had to drop their work. There remained no space for meat in the fridge, so people went to town to buy new fridges, and when the local stores ran out of fridges people went to another town to buy them. Some have tried to pass meat to relatives in other villages, but special services check cars and buses very closely. Authorities warned us not to hide pigs because they would find them anyway.

In village of Lazavičy, the local people resisted plans to kill their pigs and when special units came, they demanded documents that the disease was detected in the village. The unit had no such proof and people simply did not let them into the village.

The true scale of African swine fever outbreak can only be calculated later, but clearly it has caused huge economic to and damaged the morale of state farms and private households. The risk of penetration into the European Union remains high and EU agriculture can suffer greatly if the disease spreads there.