



African Swine Fever: The Heat is On

By Geoff Geddes, for Swine Innovation Porc

As the Canadian pork industry absorbs the news that African Swine Fever (ASF) is spreading overseas, the maxim “what you don’t know can’t hurt you” no longer applies. When it comes to this highly contagious hemorrhagic disease, the reality is just the opposite: What you don’t know CAN hurt you, and do much worse to your animals.

In an effort to arm the industry with information to lower the ASF risk, Swine Innovation Porc held an afternoon session at the Banff Pork Seminar featuring two leading swine disease experts. Part 1 of this article reviewed the talk by Dr. Egan Brockhoff, managing partner of Prairie Swine Health Services. In part 2, Dr. Greg Douglas, vice-president of animal care at Maple Leaf Foods, offers advice on mitigating the risk from ASF.

“This is a global crisis.”

Understandably, Dr. Douglas was not mincing words in describing the magnitude of the problem and the need for proactive measures to combat it.

“The viral plume coming out of China is massive, so it’s unlikely that Canada and the United States will remain ASF-free. Right now the virus is 1000 miles away, but it could be here in seconds.”

As recently as six months ago, few in North America had even heard of ASF, largely because it was not affecting areas of importance for global pork production. With the disease’s appearance in countries like China and Belgium, however, and its growing proximity to France and Germany, the issue is hitting closer to home. Symptoms can include high fever, weakness, difficulty standing, vomiting, diarrhea, coughing or labored breathing, and red or blue blotches on the skin, especially around the ears and snout.

Once contracted and present in the muscles and tissues, ASF won’t die with the infected animal. It can be transmitted via oral or nasal exposure, either directly - by contact of infected pigs with healthy pigs - or indirectly through contact with the virus from excretions, secretions and infected

tissues. As with PED, contaminated vectors like feed, transport and footwear are also a risk.

While the consequences of ASF are more severe than with some other diseases, biosecurity remains the best weapon for prevention.

“We need to impart information on ASF and biosecurity to farm managers and have them take some of this on themselves. At Maple Leaf, we have staff sign forms after viewing educational slides to ensure they understand.”

Though the industry is united in preaching biosecurity, Dr. Douglas sees the need to go farther.

“I think we should be auditing every farm in Canada and reporting the results to other producers. This lets everyone know how we’re doing and facilitates mentoring of some producers by their colleagues if there are areas for improvement.”

Driven to succeed

In Douglas’ view, efforts like a nation-wide audit should be industry driven rather than dictated by the federal government. He stresses the need for transparency and accountability and cites the Defend the Flock program as a model that could help guide the pork sector. That program encourages and prepares all poultry owners - including back-



Dr Greg Douglas at Swine Innovation Porc's health session in Banff in January 2019.
Photo: Bruce Cochrane

yard growers - to implement diligent biosecurity practices.

It was also suggested that the Canadian pork sector could take a page from their American counterparts when it comes to disease preparedness. On January 15, 2019, the U.S. pork industry announced it was aligning its efforts to reduce the risks from foreign animal disease by creating the National Swine Disease Council (NSDC). The council is comprised of key industry leaders from six distinct areas of swine science expertise.

"Maple Leaf Foods is working with industry partners and the federal government on what an 'Animal Health Canada' might look like. Perhaps it could be piloted as a government structure that would allow for faster response to, and recovery from, foreign disease threats."

Canada learned how NOT to deal with animal health issues with the avian influenza in 2003, where it took six to seven months to mobilize a proper response. Because ASF is hard to detect, virologists figure it will exist in Canada for a month or longer prior to detection. When that day comes, action must commence in hours rather than months.

"It will be incumbent on local pork associations to mobilize the response immediately. There must be provincial implementation of stop movements, as

the faster we eradicate the disease; the sooner we can advise the international community that we are ASF-free. Every province has a CVO [chief veterinary officer] who is obliged to lead during a crisis, and if they [the CVOs] don't realize that, producers must ensure they do."

Plan, prepare, protect

Protecting Canadian access to foreign markets will be critical. This will require agreements with countries like the U.S. and Mexico, and we must quickly identify ASF zones so the rest of the country is free to trade as usual.

"Last week we ran our second emergency preparedness and response exercise involving Maple Leaf, the CFIA and the Manitoba government. It was all about how we navigate that dance of chaos in the first few days of an outbreak: communicating confidence in our system; sharing the speed and scope of our response; stressing that ASF is not a food safety issue. We must understand each other's roles in advance and plan accordingly."

Then there is the issue of depopulation, as Canada currently has no plan for how to dispose of infected animals on a large scale. Just how large that scale can become has been demonstrated by China, and it's not an example the world wants to follow.

"We can't be destroying as much protein globally as they are in China because it's critical for human health. The direction taken by ASF in the world can change rapidly, and we must be on the cutting edge of those changes."

As Douglas stressed, we all have a role to play.

"If we can collaborate on devising a plan and communicating when the crisis appears, it will go a long way to maintaining confidence in the Canadian pork sector both at home and abroad."

What you don't know can certainly hurt you, but what you DO know could save your livelihood. 🐷