

Standing Group of Experts on African swine fever in Europe under the GF-TADs umbrella

Twelfth meeting (SGE ASF12) **Prague, Czech Republic, 11 and 12 March 2019**

REPORT

Summary

The twelfth meeting of the standing group of experts on African Swine Fever (SGE ASF12) took place in Prague, Czech Republic, on 11 and 12 March 2019. 32 countries attended the meeting. The 13 affected countries presented their latest epidemiological situation, and the OIE the ASF situation worldwide, particularly in Asia.

The report of the SGE expert mission in Bulgaria last January was presented and approved. The next mission of the SGE experts will be in Belgium.

Belgium explained in detail the strategy implemented since the detection of the ASF virus last September to try to stop the spread of the disease. The Czech Republic made an extensive presentation on the way ASF in wildboar was handled from the initial detection in June 2017 to the last positive carcass discovered in April 2018 and the final eradication of the disease, insisting on the lessons learnt from its successful experience.

EFSA presented the outcome of its scientific report on the ASF situation in Europe, published in November 2018.

Lithuania presented its ASF Competence Centre, created in 2018, which aims at consolidating existing competence to fight ASF and provide appropriate education and training to hunters and various professionals, from Lithuania and beyond.

The outcomes of the ministerial conference of 19 December 2018 - "Eradication of ASF in the EU and the long-term management of wild boar populations", and of the European Commission/FACE Conference of 30 January 2019 at "Jagd und Hund", Dortmund - "Preparing European hunters to eradicate ASF" were presented by the European Commission and FACE respectively.

FAO updated the participants about the recent inception meeting of the Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) for ASF preparedness in the Balkans and the main activities scheduled for the duration of the project.

The ASF awareness multilingual campaign material designed and published early February by the OIE was presented and the participants invited to take advantage of it. The English version of the 'Handbook' is undergoing the very final steps of review before its formal publication by FAO, expected in the coming weeks.

The SGE ASF12 eventually approved a set of recommendations mainly building on the success story of the Czech Republic.

Next steps the SGE ASF13 will take place in the margins of the 87th OIE general session in May 2019.

Minutes

Participants

See the attached list of participants, representing the 13 members of the SGE ASF, 19 observer countries (including Canada), and representatives from the European Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation of the EU (FACE), the European Commission, EFSA, the FAO and the OIE.

Introduction and objectives of the meeting

The SGE ASF12 was opened by Mr. Jindřich Fialka, Deputy Minister for the Section of Agriculture and Food Industry of the Czech Republic (CZ) and Dr Zbynek Semerad, CVO. They emphasised that CZ, which managed to stop the spread of ASF in the wildboar population and protect domestic pig farms but reminded that this success required great efforts and cross-sectoral collaboration, during the first 10 months in particular. Unfortunately, the disease continued to spread in other European countries and elsewhere in the world without respecting any border. CZ was ready to share its experience.

Bernard Van Goethem, president of the GF-TADs for Europe, indicated that the main objectives of the SGE ASF12 were to have an update on the epidemiological situation in each affected country, and to study the successful eradication of ASF in wildboar in CZ, which would be officially recognized free of ASF in wildboar within a couple of days. This success demonstrated that ASF can be controlled and eradicated.

All powerpoint presentations are available on the GF-TADs for Europe website.

Updates from the member countries of the SGE ASF

Belarus

No change recently. The last case of ASF was in 2013. All appropriate measures (biosecurity in farms, buffer zones around the industrial farms, etc.) remain in force.

Belgium

The preventive culling of domestic pigs in the zone at risk has been implemented early October. No outbreak in domestic pigs has been detected in Belgium. A complex zoning has been established, including 3 national operational zones with specific objectives in each of them, and the usual zoning established by EU, including a preventive zone.

The disease seems to be slowly moving westwards. A variety of measures are being implemented to prevent the extension of the infected zone, including depopulation of wild boar in certain zones, a network of fences and traps, etc.

Bulgaria

The first outbreak was detected in August 2018 in a backyard in the Varna region. The first cases in wildboar appeared in October 2018 a few meters from the border with Romania in the Silistra region, soon followed by the confirmation of other cases close by and in a fenced hunting zone on the Black sea in the Dobrich region. Further positive cases in wild boar were confirmed early this year in the Varna region.

The 'human factor' is probably responsible for the infection of the backyard in the Varna region. The North and East of Bulgaria are considered at a higher risk of ASF, and that's also where most of the pig production is concentrated.

The wild boar population has increased significantly in Bulgaria, hunting is up. No positive findings so far in the meat products tested at the borders. Awareness is ongoing.

Czech Republic

No outbreak in domestic pigs and no change of the situation since the SGE ASF 11. The last positive cases were found, on 8 February, in hunted wild boar and, on 15 April 2018, in the carcass of a dead wildboar estimated 6 months old.

Passive and active surveillance is still ongoing in the whole country, including in the formerly infected area.

Estonia

Stable situation. ASF is still present in wild boar in most of the country (except some islands), mainly in the West and South. But some cases have lately been found next to the Russian border. The last case in domestic pigs was confirmed in September 2017.

Only 4.000 wild boar have been hunted in 2018-2019, while it used to be 30.000 per year in the past. 263 cases in wild boar have been confirmed in 2018. The proportion of positives in dead vs. hunted wild boar is lower than in the past.

There is only 144 pigs farms left in the country, down from 900 in 2015. A huge effort has been made on biosecurity in those 144 remaining farms. There was no outbreak in 2018.

Hungary

There are three separate infected areas in the North-East of the country, the first resulting from the introduction of the virus via the 'human factor', the others from infected wild boar. No outbreak in domestic pigs has been detected so far.

A series of measures on hunting are being implemented with an important role of hunters: they are represented in the expert group at national level and are trained for disease control. A lot of efforts have been invested in awareness as well.

Latvia

Stable situation. The West is still the most affected part of the country. The trend of cases in wild boar is decreasing with the plummeting of their population. ASF has killed most of the wild boar, which impacts the hunting activity and therefore weakens the passive surveillance.

The last outbreak in domestic pigs was confirmed in August 2018.

It is difficult to find proper messages for awareness when almost the whole country is now affected.

Lithuania

The latest figures of positives in wild boar in 2018 and 2019 so far are available in the PPT.

There is an ongoing awareness campaign, including information for drivers at main stopping places, leaflets distributed to the drivers entering Lithuania at the main stopping places.

An ASF training is provided to all hunters in the country (priority given in the ASF free areas), and for veterinary services, including from other EU Member States or from other countries.

Moldova

The first cases in Moldova were confirmed in 2016. In 2018 the situation dramatically worsened in the centre and south of the country. There is now a total of 14 infected districts with 32 outbreaks in domestic pigs and 14 cases in wild boar.

The regulation was significantly reinforced (biosecurity and culling policy) as of October 2018. Surveillance is ongoing in domestic pigs and wild boar.

Poland

The number of cases in wild boar in 2018 was 2443, up from 741 in 2017. The number of outbreaks in 2018 was 109, up from 81 in 2017. So far in 2019, 516 cases in wild boar and 1 outbreak in pigs have been confirmed.

A coordinated intensive hunting of wild boar was launched in agreement with the Polish Hunting Association last winter in the areas listed in Part I (except in a band of 20 km along the zones listed in Part II and III), and in the areas located outside Part I. The payment to hunters was overall increased (approx. 50 € per head in the areas of part I, II and II, and 25 € in the rest of the country).

An awareness campaign, controls of personal luggage at the border check points and surveillance are ongoing.

Romania

The country faces a challenging situation, mainly in the South East and North West. 1164 outbreaks have been confirmed in 2018 (19 in commercial farms, and the rest in backyards) and 601 cases in wild boar. 64 outbreaks have been detected so far in 2019, including 1 commercial farm. 525 cases in wild boar. Jumps were observed in 2019.

601 positive wild boar have been found in 2018 and 525 so far in 2019, most of them found dead.

The legislation is being revised in 2019 to increase biosecurity in backyards, implement awareness campaigns, prohibit the commercial movements between backyard farms, etc.

Russian Federation

There was a reduction in the number of outbreaks (55) and cases (57) in 2018, more than a half them being in the Kaliningrad region. Two cases have been reported so far in 2019 in wild boar near Leningrad and Kaliningrad.

The main identified threat is now from Asia, with the risk of introduction of the virus in Russia from China and Mongolia.

The virus has been found in 2019 in pork products originating from Mongolia.

Ukraine

The peak of ASF occurrences in Ukraine was in 2017. 145 occurrences have been confirmed in 2018 (62 in backyards, 31 in pig farms, 39 in wild boar and 13 in products), down from 163 in 2017. Ten have been registered in 2019 so far (including four wild boar). The incidence of ASF is decreasing in the country.

Additional measures are being implemented as of 2019, particularly with regards surveillance in wild boar. Other ongoing measures: training, an intensive awareness campaign (meetings, distribution of flyers, broadcasts on TV and radio). The culling of pigs if fully compensated, including in backyards.

Summary of the situation in the European Union (European Commission)

The Commission showed a series of maps on the European situation and listed the main areas where the EU has taken initiatives. With regards to zoning, the EU makes the distinction between four different types, each with a specific set of measures: endemic presence (Part IV - Sardinia), infection in domestic pigs (Part III), infection in wild boar only (Part II), and particular risk of getting infected in the wild boar (Part I).

Discussion

Montenegro expressed the growing concern over ASF in the Balkans, where important preventive work is being implemented, including with awareness campaigns.

Serbia insisted on the difficult situation to the North, East and South East of its borders; awareness and coordination with hunters are taking place.

ASF worldwide epidemiological situation (OIE)

18 countries have been reported as affected by ASF in 2018 in Africa, mainly in the Western, Central and Southern Africa.

China has notified the first two outbreaks in August 2018. The disease has since spread quickly throughout large parts of the territory, mainly East, Centre, South and North. Even though the monthly

number of outbreaks has significantly decreased since the peak in October, the number of affected administrative regions is still regularly growing (as of 31 January). A few wild boar have also been detected, but the priority of the Chinese authorities goes to the domestic pig population. The virus strain is the same as in Eastern Europe. The main risk factors explaining the rapid spread of the disease are swill feeding, uncontrolled movements of live animals and the transit of contaminated vehicles. In Mongolia the first outbreaks have been notified mid-January 2019. At least 5 administrative regions are now infected. ASF is not a priority for Mongolia.

Vietnam has detected ASF on 20 February 2019. The disease is quickly progressing southwards in the domestic pig population (no control over movements of pigs, swill feeding, etc.).

The Commission mentioned that the EU will sponsor a BTSF workshop in Beijing on 8-12 April 2019, back-to-back with a high level meeting where the EC will participate, and the first meeting of a newly created SGE for ASF in Asia.

Bulgaria country mission report

This GF-TADs ASF experts mission took place in January 2019, based on the usual terms of reference for these missions. The mission visited the place where the only outbreak was detected in a backyard (Varna region, probable introduction pathway = swill feeding), a hunting ground in Silistra region and a commercial holding in the Russe region with a very level of biosecurity.

Recommendations include the need to reinforce the control of the registration of backyards, a suggestion to provide simultaneously the results of trichinella and ASF testing to the hunters, a better marking of the infected areas, the need to raise the level of passive surveillance and to enhance connection between private and official veterinarians (awareness campaigns).

Bulgaria explained that since the mission took place they have increased awareness campaigns and trainings targeting farm veterinarians and transporters.

Follow up questions were about the increased size of the active surveillance zones around the outbreak in a backyard, the most efficient method in terms of surveillance (answer is: passive surveillance), and the surveillance specifically along the border with Serbia.

The report has been approved by the SGE ASF12. It is available [here](#). The President also announced that the next mission will be taking place in Belgium. He reiterated that the experts were also available upon request to visit countries not yet affected.

Keeping ASF in wild boar under control in Belgium

The presentation describes the distribution of responsibilities at the regional and federal levels and mentions that a number of collaborative initiatives over the last two years enabled the early detection of the ASF virus in September 2018. It explains what first decisions were taken and how (including the delineation of the initial infected zone and the preventive culling of approximately 5000 pigs - all 67 pig farms in that zone). The various zones established at national level and EU level and the measures applying to pigs, wild boar and various activities are detailed.

No outbreak of ASF has been detected in the domestic pig sector in Belgium.

While the ultimate objective of the Belgium authorities is the eradication of the disease, in the short term the measures implemented aim at preventing the introduction of ASF into Belgian pig farms and at preventing the further spread of the disease in wild boar.

As regards wild boar, a number of strict measures were enforced in the infected zone in a first phase, including the prohibition of any activity in the woods. 16 hunting zones were later established, with an

objective of total depopulation in the zones protected by fences along the borders with France and Luxemburg in particular, via various methods including hunting, night shots, traps, etc. Wild boar carcasses are being actively searched for, systematically sampled, collected and destroyed. An intensive cooperation is taking place with the veterinary services of France, Luxemburg and the Netherlands.

Discussion

- As regards the route of introduction of the virus in Belgium, various theories have been mentioned: the 'sandwich theory', introduction of the virus by army personnel stationed in a military camp in the region after manoeuvres in the Baltic area; illegal importation of wild boar from Eastern Europe. None has been proven.
- Building on the Belgium presentation, the French delegation indicated that severe restrictions on hunting were implemented at first along the border with the infected zone in Belgium. Fences were later built. The priority of France is now to reduce the number of wild boar in the area along the border: fenced compartments have been created along the border area to progressively eliminate all wild boar via sniper shooting at night. There were 10 to 15 farms in the area which have been either depopulated or their biosecurity considerably reinforced. A lot of cooperation has been going on with the Belgium, Luxemburg and German authorities since the beginning of the event last September.

From ASF infection in wild boar to eradication and free status recovery in the Czech Republic

The first detection of an ASF case in wild boar occurred in Zlin, in June 2017, 400 km away from the closest infected area (Ukraine), next to the border with Slovakia. There is no evidence on the source of infection, apart from the fact that the human factor was involved.

The last case was found on 8 February 2018.

There has been no outbreak in domestic pig.

Several zones covering a region of 1000 km² were established with different measures in terms of hunting and surveillance/testing.

Passive surveillance was the key element to understand the situation, keeping in mind that the real population of wild boar is usually largely under-estimated.

Various elements of the CZ strategy:

- As of 2014 CZ decided to run passive surveillance, taking advantage of the ongoing passive surveillance for classical swine fever. Early detection is key!
- When confronted with the presence of the virus in wild boar, it is important to remember that what is being fought is the virus itself, not the wild boar; hunting as sole measure is therefore not the proper solution.
- The CZ strategy included to stop hunting and keep the infected area calm; keep the wildboar population in place; let the virus operate while actively searching for and removing carcasses; and only later finish depopulation actively. A proper understanding of the epidemiological situation of the affected area must be kept.
- Collection and disposal of carcasses was incentivised, with higher compensation than hunting to make sure that hunters would search for carcasses rather than hunt.
- Other measures included banning backyards, prohibition of feeding with fresh grass, control of movements, building of fences (odour and electrical, keeping in mind that fences are not 100% efficient), implementation of information campaigns.
- 115 hectares of fields were left unharvested to help keep the wild boar inside the zone.
- Local hunters are the best to find the carcasses. They were asked to perform intensive searching of carcasses after depopulation, with compensation for searching and not according to the number

of cadavers found, with the objective to remove as many carcasses as possible from the environment.

- Hunting was closely regulated, including in terms of biosecurity, training of hunters, compensation, disposal of carcasses, etc.
- Trapping didn't prove very effective in the infected area.
- Intensive depopulation started in October 2017 for 10 weeks by police forces with special training and equipment (thermo-vision, silencer), followed by a sudden expansion of the infected area.

The main lessons learned emphasize the importance of passive surveillance, ban on most hunting activities, strict biosecurity of regulated hunting, disposal of hunted wild boar, hunting in infected area by professionals only (snipers), active search and removal of dead wild boar, financial motivation of hunters. Collaboration with all stakeholders is the overarching key to success!

Discussion

- Why the hypothesis of expansion of the infected zone after intensive hunting? The intensive hunting / depopulation must take place after the peak of the epidemic only, fencing is not enough at that point to stop the wild boar from moving away.
- Was poisoning used to depopulate the area? No, only hunting; poisoning is prohibited in CZ due to environmental and animal welfare considerations.
- The passive surveillance procedure remained the same before and after the first case, but the compensation amount was increased.
- How about the cost of the strategy implemented by CZ? The overall cost of the episode is very important but no figure is available right now.
- In a situation of limited resources at national level, early detection is probably a higher priority than the reduction of the overall wild boar population.

EFSA November updates: 1/ Epidemiological analysis of ASF in the EU; 2/ Understanding ASF spread and emergency control concepts in wild boar populations using individual-based modelling and spatio-temporal surveillance data

Two scientific outputs expected this year, on the assessment of the situation in the Balkans in June and in the EU next December.

ASF situation in Eastern Europe (scientific report published in November 2018), main findings:

- Slow progression of the epidemic front Westwards and Southwards (8 to 17 km per year).
- There is a continuous detection of cases despite very low wild boar density after the population was dramatically reduced by the epidemics.
- Jumps of the disease occur, human mediated.
- Passive surveillance of dead wild boar is the most effective method for early detection.
- Winter and summer peaks in wild boar and summer peak in domestic pigs, not fully explained yet.
- Natural barriers (roads, rivers) are not really efficient to stop ASF from spreading.

The EFSA scientific report proposes a series of recommendation for ASF prevention 1/ in countries far away from the front, 2/ in high risk areas, 3/ in case of focal introduction (e.g. CZ or Belgium), 4/ in areas infected for more than 1 year.

EFSA reiterated a need for reliable data (particularly for South East Europe), and proposed possible collaborations in the ENETWILD and SIGMA projects.

Discussion

- Can the seropositive animals shed virus? There is no evidence of this.

- Why should the carcasses be collected in a zone before the peak of the epidemic? Because 1/ it is necessary to search for them to collect data on the dynamic of the epidemic; 2/ in practise you cannot ask people to look for the animals without collecting them; 3/ the epidemic phase is mainly determined by the contacts between live animals . The situation is different in the endemic phase, where the carcasses play a much bigger role.
- What is the real efficiency of fences? Fences will slow down the initial wave of the disease and provide time to manage the wild boar population. But fences will not stop the infection. The role of fences will have to be reviewed taking into consideration the current positive Belgium experience with fences.

ASF Competence Centre in Lithuania - for a better use of available resources

Dr Malakauskas presented this Competence Centre which was created in Lithuania in 2017, with the aim to consolidate existing competence to fight ASF and provide appropriate education and training to veterinary personnel, pig producers and hunters, including for an international public.

In Lithuania the disease is moving westwards, in wild boar and domestic pigs together, without jumps. A lot of emphasis is put on implementing proper biosecurity measures at farm level. Other activities are conducted, including for example the radio tracking of movements of wild boar.

Outcome of the ministerial conference of 19 December 2018: "Eradication of ASF in the EU and the long-term management of wild boar populations"

The European Commission presented the rationale and the outcome of the ministerial conference which took place in Brussels on 19 December 2018: "Eradication of ASF in the EU and the long-term management of wild boar populations". The target were the ministers of agriculture and the ministers of environment. The main outcome include:

- The need to have an enhanced coordination between agricultural and environmental sides.
- To design a long-term EU management strategy of the wild boar population, including ensuring minimal wildboar dispersal and awareness campaign

Efficient coordination was illustrated by the example of the active transboundary cooperation between Belgium, France, Luxemburg and Germany since September 2018, as well as the ongoing cooperation with the hunters.

Outcome of the European Commission/FACE Conference of 30 January 2019 at "Jagd und Hund", Dortmund: "Preparing European hunters to eradicate ASF"

FACE presented its views on the control of ASF: prevention before the disease is present, during the epidemic phase (FACE supports the no-hunting policy) and during the endemic phase (hunting can resume, but not via driven-hunting).

The main outcomes of the European Commission/FACE Conference which took place in Dortmund on 30 January 2019 at "Jagd und Hund", "Preparing European hunters to eradicate ASF" were about biosecurity, the need for more knowledge, the persistence of the virus in the environment and the importance of carcass removal, the importance of passive surveillance, the relevance to ban artificial feeding. Fences can help but only if combined with other measures.

The draft FACE recommendations address the successive phases of infection. Emphasis is put on awareness, cooperation, transparency, biosecurity training and advice, etc.

These recommendations will be approved at the next FACE members meeting in April 2019.

ASF emergency preparedness in the Balkans – FAO update

FAO very recently launched a TCP to help the countries in the Balkans to address the risk of ASF infection in the sub-region: preparedness, laboratory capacity, risk analysis and cost-benefit analysis capacity, awareness and regional coordination. The duration should be 1 to 1,5 year, with a funding of

500.000 USD. The inception workshop took place in Serbia on 18 to 21 February 2019, with representatives from each of the targeted countries.

The planned activities include 2,5 days ASF simulation exercises to test contingency plans, train-the-trainer programs for field veterinarians, workshops on wild boar management and hunting biosecurity, national workshops focusing on biosecurity in the backyard sector.

A regional workshop on wild boar management will take place in Belgrade in May with the kind support of the Czech Republic.

Representatives from several countries of the Balkans confirmed that they are actively preparing to face incursions of the disease in the sub-region.

Update on awareness campaigns and material

The objective of the OIE awareness campaign on ASF launched in early February is to make sure that all actors involved are aware of and take the necessary precautions to prevent the further spread of ASF. It targets small backyard pig farmers, commercial pig farms, hunters, travellers, transport authorities and check point staff, with specific messages for each of them.

It includes a variety of material: posters, an infographic on biosecurity measures, leaflets for travellers, a social media toolkit, a video (YouTube). The posters, infographic and leaflets are available in English, French, Mandarin Russian and Spanish versions.

The master files can be communicated upon request for translation in national languages.

The GF-TADs secretariat also updated the participants on the state of play of the formal publication of the Handbook by the FAO. The editing of the English version is almost finalized. It will be followed by a check of the layout and its proof-reading.

The final version should be published online within a few weeks.

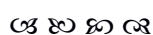
Presentation, discussion and adoption of SGE ASF12 recommendations

The draft recommendations of the SGE ASF12 were presented by the President and endorsed by the SGE ASF12 participants.

CLOSING REMARKS – FUTURE STEPS

The President stressed that the CZ example proves that small scale incursions of ASF can be eradicated when the scientific advices are followed and implemented in the field.

The next meeting (SGE ASF13) will take place next May in Paris, in the margins of the OIE general session. Several options are still being considered for the venue of the SGE ASF14 next autumn, including a generous proposal by Bulgaria to host this meeting.



We would like to sincerely thank the European Union, the Government of the Czech Republic and the OIE for kindly supporting and hosting the SGE ASF12.