

African swine fever: restrictions and control of private imports

The African swine fever ASF is a serious African haemorrhagic disease that affects pigs and wild boars and is caused by the ASF virus. The disease is lethal to pigs, but does not pass on to humans. The symptoms of the disease are, for example, fever, haemorrhaging, changes in the internal organs and high mortality rate of the sick animals. Other animals or humans do not catch the African swine fever, but can spread the disease. The disease spreads through pig-to-pig contact as well as through the pigs' discharges, contaminated goods, pig meat, products made of pig meat and bi-products from pigs. For example, hunting dogs and hunters can spread the disease to new areas if they have been exposed to pigs' discharge in the forest or with a hunted wild boar.

The ASF virus is highly resilient. It remains viable in frozen pig meat for several years and for several months (even up to a year) in uncooked pig meat products. The virus can stay alive in the soil for over six months and for several months in a pig's carcass and bi-products. The temperature, pH, moisture and the amount of UV radiation, for example, all contribute to the virus remaining infectious. The ASF virus dies in 30 minutes when heated to over 70 °C.

ASF must be combatted based on legislation and international agreements. The disease is deadly to pigs; there is no treatment or vaccine. The virus has not yet been found in Finland.

If ASF was to spread to Finland

If ASF were to enter a pig farm, the authorities would order the pigs to be put down and the carcasses to be destroyed. After this, the pig farm would be cleaned and disinfected. Products and tools taken from the farm that could possibly spread the disease such as fodder, carcasses, sperm, embryos, manure, would be traced and ordered for destruction or treatment in such a way that the pathogen is destroyed.

International trade coming to a standstill would cause the greatest economical losses to the pig farms and the whole meat industry. Furthermore, economical loss would be caused, for example, by the disruption of the production chain (Risk assessment by LUKE and Evira 2015).

The State reimburses the cost of actions against the disease and the cost of destruction. Costs are caused for instance by having to put down and destroy the pigs as well as by disinfecting the pig farms. Moreover, the producers are reimbursed the value of the pigs and receive a possible reimbursement for production losses.

The average price assessment of one outbreak of the disease is around 10.5 million euros (95% ranging between €4.6 and 22.7 million, assessment by Evira and Luke 3/2015). The losses of the livestock sector, that is the pig farms and the meat industry, are even greater (€7.5–38.1 million). The main costs would be caused by export restrictions and the export stoppage. The cost impact mentioned above was calculated on a wild boar population of 200 specimens, but the current estimates include over 3,000 specimens. At the time of the assessment, the export of pig meat to China had not yet opened. Nowadays, pig meat worth around 9 million euros is exported to China every year.

ASF is spreading through the wild boar population in the Baltic countries and based on observations by Poland, it spreads a distance of 1–2 kilometres a month. Longer jumps in the spread of the disease are a result of human activities. There are around 3.500 wild boars in Finland, most of which are in the southeast near the Russian border.

If ASF is detected, the export of pig meat would not be possible for example to China, South Korea, Japan (export 2018 around 560.000 kilos) or Singapore (export 2018 around 318.000 kilos), since the export conditions require that Finland is free from ASF.

Control trips to Finland by the Commission

EU representatives make control trips to member states on EU's eastern borders to check the efficiency of ASF control measures. The control trips to Finland took place in 2016 and 2017. Finland received the assignment of enhancing border controls to prevent the ASF from spreading through illicit food brought in by passengers.

Actions taken to enhance border controls in Finland:

- Increased cooperation between authorities,
- Harmonisation of Customs control measures,
- Additional instructions and training provided by the Food Authority to Customs,
- Additional information showing at the border crossing points as well as making better use of different information channels to provide preliminary information regarding restrictions on private imports,
- Rubbish bins at the border for the destruction of illicit food,
- Training Customs' food detector dogs for detecting illicitly imported food,
- The Finnish Food Authority has made brochures and bulletins regarding restrictions on imports as well as campaigned through ASF videos in different media.

ASF situation in Russia, China and other countries in Asia

ASF first spread to Georgia in 2007 via food waste from African ships. The disease continued from Georgia to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, where it spread through the wild boar population via contaminated meat and meat products. The disease has been observed every year in Russia since 2007. In the last few years, infected specimens observed near Finland have for example been detected in February 2019 in wild boars in a protected area in Msinsk, south of St Petersburg. The disease is, among other places, present in the neighbouring regions of Moscow both in wild boars and in domestic pigs.

ASF was first detected in China's northeast near the North Korean border in July 2018. After the first case, ASF has spread wildly throughout most of China; forcing the country's pig farming to its knees. The disease has also spread to China's neighbouring countries Mongolia (2019) North Korea (2019) and Hong Kong (2019). ASF has also been detected in Vietnam.

Distribution of ASF in the EU territory

ASF entered the EU territory in 2014 after spreading to Lithuania, Poland, Latvia and Estonia; cases have occurred on a yearly basis, both in domestic pigs and in wild boars. For example, insufficient disease control in neighbouring countries has enabled the spread of the disease. The long-distance spread of the disease from one area or country to the next is usually connected with human activities, such as moving foods or sick pigs that are contaminated with the virus. In summer 2017, ASF spread to the Czech Republic, where it is suspected that it was transmitted from infected food waste. Since then, the Czech Republic has eradicated the disease from the country. ASF was found in Romania in July-August of 2017 and in 2018, the disease spread like wildfire across the country.

In Hungary, the first case was a dead wild boar found in April 2018. The disease has been detected in several wild boars found dead. The source of the disease has not been verified, but it is believed that packed lunches of Ukrainian migrating workers have ended up being eaten by wild boars, who have subsequently gone for their spring hike spreading the disease, since all the cases found are near the Ukrainian border.

Outbreaks are still observed every week in the EU territory; mainly in the Baltic region and in Romania.

Actions against AFS in the EU and import restriction on gifts imported from outside the EU

Empty animal transport vehicles returning from Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine must, according to EU requirements, be washed and disinfected in controlled locations before their return to the EU territory. Otherwise, they will be turned back or guided to a designated location to be disinfected inside the EU. Animal markets are prohibited in risk areas. Protection from diseases at pig farms has been improved and pig meat producers and hunters have been trained. Despite actions against the disease, new cases are detected every year in the EU territory.

The importation of meat, meat products, milk and milk products for personal use, or products sent as a postal consignment to a private person from countries outside the EU, to countries in the EU is explicitly forbidden (Commission Regulation (EC) No 206/2009).

In Finland, the follow-up of African swine fever began in 2010. Nowadays, the programme is partly funded by the EU Commission. Finnish Customs controls personal foods brought in by passengers or sent as gifts in postal parcels. In 2018, Customs controlled 156.145 imported gifts (2017: 112.399) of which 1.106 contained illicit foods (2017: 690). A quantity of 5.058 kilos of illicit meat and meat products was detected (2017: 1.844 kilos) as well as 666 kilos of illicit milk and milk products (2017: 529 kilos).

Finland's first food detector dog Aino, began working on 14 August 2018 and participated effectively in the detection of illicit foods, for example in passenger's luggage and vehicles. A quantity of 1.700 kilos of illicit foods were detained at Nuijamaa in 2018. Of this quantity, Aino detected 600 kilos. At Vaalimaa, 2.300 kilos of illicit products were detained by Customs personnel and from the so-called 'repentance-bins'; 580 kilos at Vainikkala and 550 kilos at Imatra. By May 2019, the food detector dog Aino had found 1.000 kilos of illicit products.

Bringing in foods can also spread other animal diseases, such as foot and mouth disease.