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Fatal Virus Detected in Hog Herds in 17 States, but Health Authorities Say Problem is Minimal in Mexico

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Four of the top-five hog-producing states in Mexico have tested positive for the presence of the deadly Porcine Epidemic Diarrhea Virus (PED), which has forced health authorities in North America, Asia, and other regions to slaughter millions of young pigs in the past year in an effort to control the spread of the disease. While the PED virus can be fatal for hogs, the disease does not pose a danger to humans.

The Servicio Nacional de Sanidad, Inocuidad y Calidad Agroalimentaria (SENASICA) said the presence of the virus in Mexico does not pose an imminent threat to Mexican hog herds, but health authorities are nevertheless remaining vigilant.

The outbreak of PED, which was first detected in the US about a year ago, forced Mexican health authorities to begin testing hog farms in Mexico in the past several months. SENASICA—a division of the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA)—examined more than 2,300 samples from 19 states in Mexico between August 2013, when the outbreak was first detected in the US, and May 2014.

The presence of the virus was found in samples from 17 states, including four of the top producers: Jalisco, Sonora, Puebla, and Guanajuato. PED was also detected among hogs in Aguascalientes, Baja California, Colima, the Federal District, Guerrero, México state, Michoacán, Morelos, Nuevo León, Querétaro, Sinaloa, Tlaxcala, and Veracruz.

The virus was not present in two states that were tested: Oaxaca and Yucatán, which is also among Mexico’s five top producers.

"This disease displayed an incidence of less than 1% (0.00005%), in relation to our national inventory of 16 million head," SENASICA said in a report to the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE).

"Of the total samples, only 30% tested positive for porcine epidemic diarrhea and 70% tested negative, which raises the possibility that another agent might be involved," said the report.

Mexican hog industry also not concerned

SENASICA said that hog farmers have been asked to take preventative measures, including consistent monitoring of their herds, disinfecting contaminated areas, and either slaughtering or treating some of the animals that have tested positive. Mexico also imposed a ban on imports of hogs from the US in May 2013 because of the PED outbreak.

Mexican hog farmers also have little concern, given the results of the SENASICA tests and the ban on imports of US hogs. "As we can see by the reported infections, the problem is not significant," said José Luis Caram Inclán, president of the Confederación de Porcicultores Mexicanos (CPM).
"And since we quickly took preventative measures, we have not registered the type of problems that have occurred in the US."

Still, Caram Inclán expressed a measure of caution. "As is the case with any disease, we do not have a crystal ball to tell us what is going to happen," said the CPM president. "But if Mexico continues to take the precautions that have been taken to date, I believe that the presence of PED will not have a major impact on national production."

For the US hog industry, the infections have been greatest among herds in Iowa, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Kansas, although PED has been detected in 23 states. "It's easy to imagine that we could have lost a million pigs, and before the winter is over I wouldn't be surprised if the impact would be maybe three, four times that," Rodney Baker, a professor of veterinary medicine at Iowa State University, said in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) in January.

The loss of 1 million hogs is relatively small compared with the total US herd, estimated at about 66 million animals. "Even though the 1 million pigs killed by the virus are just a small portion of the industry, those losses will translate into real dollars lost for the producers who expected to sell those piglets as full-size hogs," said NPR.

SENASICA officials said the government has put together a team of health experts to provide advice on how to proceed with the outbreak. The group includes specialists from countries where the virus has been detected: the US, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and Germany.

Even though Mexican health authorities and the hog industry are downplaying concerns about PED in Mexico, the potential for a larger outbreak is great if precautionary measures are not taken.

"Since its arrival, PED has been spreading relentlessly, not unlike how a cold can rip through a preschool classroom even if kids are required to wash their hands," said NPR. "PED spreads within barns and from farm to farm, even when strict biosecurity measures—hand-washing for livestock workers—are in place. That's because it can survive in tiny bits of manure that travel on boots or trucks."

The outbreak in North America prompted France to impose a ban on imports of live hogs, hog byproducts, and hog sperm from the region at the beginning of May. The ban includes Mexico, even though the country does not traditionally export any hogs to France. The US and Canada only export a small amount of hogs to France. France is the first member of the European Union (EU) to restrict imports of US hogs. China, the world’s largest pork consumer, and Japan have already imposed temporary restrictions on US hog imports, but the ban did not initially extend to Mexico and Canada.

While the rest of the EU has not followed France in imposing the ban on live hogs from North America, the European Commission—the bloc’s governing body—announced new rules that require more stringent controls on pork byproducts used for animal feed. Blood products such as pig plasma are commonly used around the world in the diets of piglets after they have been weaned, a practice that spreads the disease, said the OIE.

The French ban does not include pork and other products intended for human consumption, because the disease is not dangerous to humans.
The Mexican government’s customs statistics system (Sistema de Información Arancelaria Vía Internet, SIAVI) said Mexico exported more than 86,000 tons of pork in 2013, an increase of 3% from 2012, but none of those exports went to France. The principal markets for Mexican pork are Japan, the US, South Korea, China, Vietnam, and Singapore, said SIAVI.

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