

Radioactive boars on the rise in Germany

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Forester Andreas Thiermeyer takes a piece of wild boar meat in Eglharting near Munich, southern Germany, on Wednesday, Aug. 18, 2010. Almost a quarter century after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear meltdown in Ukraine, its fallout is still a hot topic in some German regions, where thousands of boars shot by hunters still turn up with excessive levels of radioactivity. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)

(AP) -- It was a big shot. A big hog. And a big disappointment.

When Georg van Bebber hauled back his [wild boar](#) from Ebersberg forest near Munich after a day of hunting, he was exhilarated about his impressive prey.

But before he could take it home, a Geiger counter showed a problem:

The boar's meat was radioactive to an extent considered potentially dangerous for consumption. It needed to be thrown out and burnt.

"I really would have liked to have this boar," van Bebber said when he recounted the incident in a telephone interview from Bavaria.

Almost a quarter century after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear meltdown in Ukraine, its fallout is still a hot topic in some German regions, where thousands of boars shot by hunters still turn up with excessive levels of radioactivity. In fact, the numbers are higher than ever before.

The total compensation the German government paid last year for the discarded contaminated meat shot up to a record sum of euro425,000 (about \$558,000), from only about euro25,000 ten years ago, according to the Federal Environment Ministry in Berlin.

"The reason is that there are more and more boars in Germany, and more are being shot and hunted, that is why more contaminated meat turns up," spokesman Thomas Hagbeck told The Associated Press.

"But this also shows how long radioactive fallout remains a problem in the environment," he said.

Boars are among the species most susceptible to long-term consequences of the nuclear catastrophe 24 years ago. Unlike other wild game, boars often feed on mushrooms and truffles which tend to store radioactivity and they plow through the [contaminated soil](#) with their snouts, experts say.

However, boars are actually the beneficiaries of another ecological crisis - climate change.

Central Europe is turning into a land of plenty for the animals, as

warmer weather causes beech and [oak trees](#) to overproduce seeds and farmers to grow more crops the boars like to feast on such as corn or rape, said Torsten Reinwald of the German Hunting Federation.

"The number of boars in Germany has quadrupled or quintupled over the last years, as has the number of boars shot," Reinwald said, adding that other countries like France and Poland are seeing a similar proliferation of boars.

Last season, hunters brought home a record 640,000, and following that trend, the amount of contaminated meat also went off the charts. Judging from the total compensation paid out in 2009, about 2,000 to 4,000 boars were found to have levels above the 600 becquerel of radioactivity per kilogram allowed for human consumption. That compares to about 125 to 250 a decade ago.

"The impact of the Chernobyl fallout in Germany, in general, has decreased," said Florian Emrich, spokesman of the Federal Office for Radiation Protection. For example, radiation has ceased to be a problem on fields cultivated with commercial crops, he said.

But forest soil in specific regions that were hit hardest after Chernobyl - parts of Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg in southern Germany - still harbors high amounts of radioactive Cesium-137 which has a half life of roughly 30 years, Emrich said.

In fact, the Cesium from the Chernobyl fallout is moving further into the ground and has now reached exactly the layer where the boars' favorite truffles grow, the Hunting Association's Reinwald said. Therefore, the season for such truffles - a variety not eaten by humans - usually means a rising number of radioactive boars.

Experts so far have no evidence that the animals suffer from the

relatively low levels of radioactivity accumulating in their bodies. Still authorities are striving to make sure no tainted meat enters the human food chain.

Hunters and authorities go out of their way assuring consumers that none of the problematic meat will end up on their tables.

"We can guarantee that there is no contaminated meat on the market," said Ulrich Baade, spokesman for the regional hunters association in Baden-Wuerttemberg. "In problematic regions, every single hunted boar will be tested for radioactivity before being sold."

Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg have dozens of testing stations, many of which are run by hunters, and the compensation promised by the German Atomic Energy Law gives them a financial incentive to hand over radioactive meat.

"For a young boar you get 100 Euros from the government, for a larger boar 200," Guenther Baumer, a veterinarian running a testing station in Bavaria, said. "That fully covers the damage."

In fact, it might sometimes be even more lucrative to sell to the state than to commercial outlets.

Hunter van Bebber said that with the gigantic numbers of boars pushing onto the market prices sometimes hit lows of only euro1 per kilogram (about \$1.30 for 2.2 pounds) while probably averaging at around euro2.50. For an average 35 kilograms of meat per animal that would mean only about euro90.

Therefore, not everybody is as unhappy as van Bebber.

"The disappointment (when radioactivity is found in meat) is usually

rather limited," said vet Baumer.

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