

Bulgaria, Romania struggle with swine fever outbreaks

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When Vanya Dimitrova received the Bulgarian veterinary services' notice to kill her pigs because of African swine fever, she was shocked.

No outbreaks of the disease—which is menacing countries around the world, including China and swaths of Europe—have been recorded in her area.

While authorities say backyard farming is allowing the epidemic to spread, villagers are angry about orders to kill their pigs around outbreak sites and, in Bulgaria, even around uninfected industrial farms.

"It can't be right to slaughter healthy animals... In fact, it's all about saving the big farmers with the big money, and getting us, small poor people, to pay the bill," the 49-year-old from the village of Bezmer in the northeast of the country told AFP.

'Scared' breeders

In Bulgaria, as well as in neighbouring Romania, hundreds of thousands of pigs have been culled in recent months, wiping out almost 10 percent of the poor EU members' industries.

Other European countries whose domestic pigs have been hit this year are Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Serbia, Ukraine and, for the first time, Slovakia.

"We are scared. We know that it will last for some time. Nobody acts, we are one step behind the disease," Mary-Eugenia Pana, head of Romania's Pig Farmers Association, told AFP.

Romania, where the disease broke out in 2017, has by far the highest number of outbreaks in domestic pigs in the region with more than 1,200 so far this year, according to European Commission data.

"We should at least save the big farms... The present situation is a disaster. Every day there is a new outbreak," Pana said.

Experts say the disease, which was first detected in Europe in 2007 in Georgia and Russia, is expected to continue to spread among domestic pigs and wild boar.

African swine fever is not harmful to humans but causes haemorrhagic fever in pigs and wild boar that almost always ends in death within a few days.

There is no antidote or vaccine. The only known method to prevent the disease from spreading is a mass cull of infected livestock.

Stricter measures needed

Stricter measures, including cracking down on backyard farming, must be taken to prevent the epidemic's spread, said Nikolay Valkanov of the Sofia-based InteliAgro think tank.

Valkanov criticised Bulgaria for acting too late to stop the disease coming from Romania across the Danube river in 2018.

A fence built last year between Bulgaria and Romania covered only one-quarter of the border, he said.

"Now the government starts taking some steps in the right direction, but of course it won't be possible to stop the disease. I expect it to be around for many years," he told AFP.

Outgoing EU commissioner for health and food safety, Vytenis Andriukaitis, said cross border cooperation was "crucial" but also urged farmers to cooperate.

"Only collective efforts can eradicate the disease," he told a press conference on the sidelines of an international expert meeting on the epidemic on Tuesday.

The EU has promised Bulgaria 2.9 million euros (\$3.2 million) in financial aid to tackle the disease.

Way of living

Dimitrova, a furniture factory worker who counts on the extra earnings from her backyard pig raising, is one of a few dozen villagers in Bezmer who have so far refused to kill their animals.

The village falls in a 20-kilometre (12-mile) zone around two big still-uninfected farms, and a cull has been ordered as a preventive measure. Dimitrova currently has four female pigs, one male and 21 piglets.

Only industrial farmers are compensated for the pigs they have to cull, while backyard breeders who are not registered, like Dimitrova, were only promised to get 150 euros after culling their animals.

Other villages in the region have also seen farmer protests.

"They are doing away with the whole way of living in Bulgarian villages, where people are used to raising animals," Dimitrova said.

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