

Case of African swine fever confirmed in northern Italy

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A case of African swine fever has been detected in a wild boar in Italy, the region of Piedmont said Friday, in a potential blow to the country's meat industry.

It is the first reported case on Italy's mainland since the virus arrived in Western Europe in 2018.

Highly transmissible and fatal for pig populations, African swine fever (ASF) does not present a risk for human health, but risks serious repercussions for pork producers.

Italy, with about 8.9 million pigs, is the seventh biggest pork producer in the European Union, representing an 8 billion euro (\$9.1 billion) industry, according to the agricultural association Confagricoltura.

Piedmont's regional health department confirmed the case following tests on a wild boar which was found dead in Ovada in the northern region.

Italy's national reference centre for swine fever "confirmed the suspicion of infection with African swine fever" said the department in a statement.

As per protocol, crisis units were being set up at the local, regional and national level, while meetings were being held with authorities in veterinary services, forest management and wildlife and hunting, it said.

"We are acting with the utmost timeliness, the immediate and coordinated implementation of control measures in wild suids (pigs) is essential in an attempt to confine and eradicate the disease as much as possible," said Piedmont's health deputy, Luigi Icardi.

'Extremely damaging'

In Italy, African swine fever has been endemic on the island of Sardinia since first appearing in 1978.

Having existed in Africa for decades, the disease spread to China—the world's largest pork producer—in 2018, causing millions of pigs to be slaughtered to prevent an epidemic.

In western Europe, the virus was reported in Belgium in 2018, prompting China to ban Belgian pork imports.

After Germany confirmed its first case in a dead wild boar in 2020, China, Japan and South Korea, alongside Brazil and Argentina, also suspended German pork imports.

Italy's health ministry will notify the World Organisation of Animal Health (OIE) and the European Commission about the case, reported news agency ANSA.

In a December 3 situation report on the virus, the OIE said ASF has been reported in 32 countries in five different world regions since January 2020, affecting more than one million pigs and more than 28,000 wild boar.

"The events observed in the last six months confirm the global threat of ASF, which continues to spread with serious impacts on pig production systems, animal health and welfare, as well as the socio-economic impacts on livelihoods, national food security and international trade," the report said.

After Germany's first case, Confagricoltura said Italy had activated a EU-approved surveillance and prevention plan since early 2020.

On Friday, the Piedmont branch of Confagricoltura said Italy must do all it can to prevent the virus from spreading and called for redoubled efforts for a wild boar culling programme.

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