

On guard against African swine fever

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Friday, 07 June 2019 06:07

The deadly African swine fever virus is spreading like wildfire. It has already ravaged China's US\$128 billion pork industry and has spread to other Asian countries and territories, including Hong Kong, last month.

Although African swine fever is not harmful to humans, given its high mortality rate, it has the potential to wipe out Taiwan's pork industry and, as a result, destroy not just the livelihoods of farmers and related businesses, but also undermine the nation's food security and push up prices. Since there is no vaccine or treatment for the disease, the government must do everything in its power to prevent it from spreading to Taiwan.

African swine fever has been with us for a long time: Scientists have traced the virus as far back as 1907, although the first identified outbreak was in Kenya in 1921. The virus remained confined to the African continent until 1957, when it spread to Europe through Portugal into Spain, the two European nations worst hit by the virus. The virus entered China — scientists are still unsure of the route of transmission — with its first confirmed outbreak in Liaoning Province in August last year. Since then, it has spread across many Chinese provinces.

Bloomberg yesterday published an in-depth analysis of the situation in China and the wider Asian region. China is home to 440 million pigs, or half of the world's hog population. Official figures show that it has culled 1.1 million pigs to stop the spread of the virus, while estimates based on previous outbreaks indicate that this could rise to an astonishing 200 million by end of this year: nearly half of the nation's pig population.

In Vietnam, health officials have already culled more than 1.7 million pigs. The virus has also spread to Mongolia, North Korea and, most recently, Hong Kong.

Given Taiwan's geographical proximity to these countries and the high degree of trade and travel between Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Vietnam, the significant danger to the nation's pork industry — and its wider economy — should be obvious.

The government is rightly treating African swine fever as a national security threat and the Council of Agriculture has established an emergency operation center to oversee prevention

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efforts.

Officials are focused on identifying and confiscating banned pork products at the nation's borders. According to statistics compiled by the Central Epidemic Command Center, from Aug. 27 last year to May 11, a total of 1,463 pork products were tested for the virus, with 57 — 55 from China and two from Vietnam — testing positive.

Despite the government's efforts to date, there is much more that needs to be done. This could include beefing up fines. Last month, Democratic Progressive Party Legislator Ho Chih-wei (何志偉) proposed that repeat offenders be fined up to NT\$3 million (US\$95,481). Australia and Japan have introduced prison sentences — up to 10 years and three years respectively — for any traveler failing to declare and caught transporting diseased pork.

Improving education about the virus is also paramount. First, for local pig farmers, so that they know what symptoms to look out for and how to effectively deal with an identified outbreak to prevent the virus from spreading. Second, for businesses and the wider public, so that everyone has up-to-date information on which types of products from which countries are prohibited.

Lastly, the government must incentivize farmers to modernize their operations and introduce strict quarantine and biosecurity measures to ensure that if the virus does enter Taiwan, it can be effectively contained.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2019/06/07](#)