

Standing Group of Experts on African swine fever in Europe under the GF-TADs umbrella

Fifteenth meeting (SGE ASF15) 6 May 2020 - Teleconference

REPORT

Summary

Due to the sanitary situation of the COVID-19, the fifteenth meeting of the standing group of experts on African Swine Fever (SGE ASF15), initially planned in Slovakia, took place as a teleconference on May of 6 2020. 31 countries of Europe participated, as well as representatives of China and Japan.

The participating member countries of the SGE-ASF for Europe briefly presented their national epidemiological situation regarding ASF, focussing on the changes since the last meeting in Sofia in September 2019. They were also invited to provide the SGE and the Secretariat an idea of the impact the COVID 19 situation had on their ASF surveillance.

The Secretariat took the opportunity to present to the participants an overview of the ASF around the world. The OIE, the European Commission and FAO respectively completed the picture with the global, the European and the Balkans situations of ASF. A representative of the OIE in Asia gave a quick overview of the work done within the GF-TADs SGE on ASF recently settled, with a specific development on the epidemiology in Asia. With the crisis management experience in Belgium, the participants got a good picture of ASF situation.

The report of the SGE expert mission in Serbia in December 2019 was circulated among the European countries. Without any objection received before the meeting, the report was approved and proposed to be shared on the GF-TADs page of the OIE website for Europe. The SGE ASF mission planned in Slovakia in April 2020 was postponed, due to the COVID-19 situation. A mission of the SGE experts will be organized as soon as the sanitary situation enables in Greece.

The SGE ASF15 discussed and approved a set of recommendations. The SGE ASF 16 should take place in Hungary in November 2020, as long as the regional sanitary situation enables it. Otherwise, the teleconference format will be kept.

A very large number of participants (79) attended this 15th meeting of the SGE ASF for Europe, for the very first time organised as teleconference. They represented the 14 members of the SGE ASF for Europe, 19 observer countries, and representatives from: the European Commission, the FAO and the OIE. The invitation has been extended to the Presidents of GF-TADs America and Asia.

Introduction and objectives of the meeting

The President of GF-TADs for Europe, Bernard Van Goethem, welcomed the participants and thanked the Delegate of Slovakia, Josef Bires, for the preparation of the physical unfortunately cancelled meeting. The topics and format of the meeting have been adapted to the situation. He invited the speakers to focus their presentation on updating the participants with progress of the ASF situation in their country, with information on the way the COVID crisis impacts on the ASF control.

Updates from the member countries of the SGE ASF

All the detailed figures are available in the country presentations.

Belarus (Ivan Smilhin)

(no presentation; translated from Russian by OIE FP Communication for Belarus, Anna Sandul)

No change in the epizootic situation. The country declared still to be free from ASF and state veterinary service makes all possible efforts to keep on this state of play. All the major activities are established by the Republican Headquarter on ASF. Two main approaches are applied: active depopulation of wild boars (WB) and biosecurity measures at public swine holdings and private backyards farms. Active and passive surveillances are in place, covering WB and domestic pigs (DP) of public and private sectors.

By the 1st May this year, 3284 WB were hunted. Hunters and owners of hunting grounds receive compensation (79 USD, in which 34 USD is for the hunter). For the 1st quarter of 2020, the numbers of tested hunted/found dead WB are 2401/120. All the results of lab testing are negative. All the DP tested by the laboratories in the public and private sectors, are also negative. Seven laboratories are involved in ASF testing.

COVID-19 didn't impact on the veterinary activities, including surveillance and monitoring.

Belgium (Myriam Logeot)

No active circulation and no virus found for months. The last case was found in the beginning of March 2020. In the zones of the country considered free, all the WB found dead or hunted were ASF negative. In the rest of the country, 6 cases were found positive (bones), none for the hunted ones. So far, no case was found in DP. The only clinical suspicion, in a non-commercial farm, was negative. Belgium hopes to apply for a free status in autumn 2020.

COVID-19, no impact on the surveillance activities in domestic pigs.

Bulgaria (Anna Zdravkova)

17 outbreaks in DP from the beginning of 2020, the latest in the end of April.

Since the beginning of the last hunting season, the control measures seem to work well, without seropositive found in WB.

No positive results among the DP tested in the zones of the country considered free. In backyard farms in the affected zones, massive culling was carried out from August 2019.

Numerous new measures are implemented from 2020: amendments in the legislation, with easier registration for the backyards, better veterinary supervision, new compensation rules, promotion of individual biosecurity plans, increased expenditure for epizootic diseases; new surveillance plans agreed upon by the minister.

Bulgaria organised preventive culling, preferably in backyards, rather than bigger farm, 20 km around high-risk spots, customised at the region level. The backyards depopulated last year took the engagement not to populate their farms for 1 year (until September 2020).

Biosecurity and strengthening of movement would be the improvement proposed.

COVID-19: No much impact on the country surveillance on ASF.

Czech Republic (Petr Satran)

The country celebrated its first year of ASF free status in April 2020. However, the risk is quite high, with outbreaks in Poland, 50 km from the border. Collaboration is developed with Germany to avoid the spread from Poland to CZ and Germany.

Measures are in place to reduce WB population, ban their feeding and the import of trophies, and to train hunters on testing and biosecurity. Passive surveillance is implemented in WB (80 euros paid per sample) and in DP (test in case of suspicious death).

Estonia (Maarja Kristian)

In the zones considered free, all found and hunted WB tested were negative.

No suspicions in DP. Among those tested, all were negatives, showing the quality of the passive surveillance in DP.

Declaration of Estonia to the OIE, claiming to be free in domestic and captive feral pigs from 2017.

COVID-19: all control programmes were maintained and trying to move back to a normal life.

Greece (Laskarina-Maria Korou)

No affected zones in Greece.

Low number of WB found dead. All WB are ASF negative (found dead and hunted).

No decision for ASF suspicion in DP for this period. The unique positive case in DP was in Central Macedonia region.

COVID-19 impact on ASF surveillance: the WB surveillance has been affected by movement restriction, without any possibility to organize hunting groups. Huge effort to increase surveillance in protection and surveillance zones. Limitation of veterinarians and staff resources but still a big number of samples during the pandemic.

Hungary (Szabolcs Pasztor)

The first case was confirmed 2 years ago.

A large proportion of WB found are still PCR positive, while very few of them reveal seropositivity.

The meat of WB is not allowed to enter the food chain. Zoning progressed over the last 12 months, following the disease progressing to the West. The control zones moved in accordance.

No outbreak in DP.

Latvia (Martins Serzants)

The presentation focused on the fact that, in DP, the four suspected cases were all negative, whereas the WB surveillance provided 0% seropositivity in the 60% PCR positivity among the WB found dead. In the hunted WB, out of over 9,000 animals, 0.5% were PCR positive, 2% seropositive.

During COVID-19 everything is normal, except for the biosecurity checks: on-site inspections were replaced by a remote national database checks.

Lithuania (Darius Remeika)

In the ASF free zone, 3 WB were found dead and over 200 were hunted, none of them was positive. In the affected zones the situation is quite different as dead and hunted WB showed PCR or seropositivity. In particular, of the 6,709 hunted, 157 positives, of which 21 % were PCR positive and 79% seropositive.

In the zones considered affected, regular suspicions in DP, among which 5 confirmed outbreaks.

Moldova (Maxim Sirbu)

In the free zones, the number of WB found dead increased from 12 in 2019 to 76 this year, among which only 2 were not positive to PCR. In the affected zones, all were positive.

In the free zones, 2 of the 7 suspected outbreaks in backyard farms were confirmed, while in the affected zones, 1 case of the 7 backyard farms was confirmed.

Poland (Krzysztof Jazdzewski)

The presentation did not focus only on the classic surveillance which can be seen in detail in the available power point, but on the strategic work carried out by the Polish Veterinary Services. There is over 45% of the entire country being currently regionalised. The situation is clearly complicated.

In 2020 over 340.000 tests on WB and DP were performed. Two new outbreaks were experienced in the western part of the country establishing new epidemiological cluster. The some strategic decisions taken such as fencing and traps for whole wester cluster. The authorities increased the collaboration with bordering countries, introduced new bio-security rules and, together with hunters, searched, hunted and targeted better the WB.

Romania (Robert Chioveanu)

The situation is quite complicated, as the areas which were free are now showing PCR positivity in the WB population, especially in those found dead. In the affected zones, the situation is not that different, PCR positivity equals to almost 70% of the dead WB.

In DP, the outbreaks confirmed are all in the backyard farms in the zones considered previously as free.

COVID-19 consequences: Control measures are difficult to implement, due to confinement and quarantine of pig owners. Stakeholders require lighter conditions to better contribute to the disease control.

Russian Federation (Nikita Lebedev)

Unfortunately, the huge territory and the fact that China is not reporting outbreaks in the WB population, does not help Russia. The situation is worrying in the area bordering China and close to Europe and Eurasia. These are the zone where regionalization has been carried out through the Cerberus System.

COVID-19 has impacted daily controls, especially surveillance related to WB hunting, as hunting activities are forbidden

Serbia (Boban Duric)

The situation in Serbia is complicated, as the maps provided show. The problems are not only present in the eastern bordering part, but also towards the centre where a buffer zone has been created. While the figures can be seen in the power point, it is important to focus that also the domestic population is affected.

Despite the problems and the budgetary issues created by COVID-19, Serbia can proudly show a huge commitment in controlling the disease, as clearly shown by the number of tests and controls and the constant dialogue with neighbouring countries. However, the future remains uncertain after the COVID-19 crisis.

Slovakia (Jozef Bires)

With regards to this country, the positive note is that no outbreaks have been reported in the domestic population. On the other hand, the situation concerning WB is not stable as positivity has been reported in both dead and hunted WB. This applies to free zones and to zones where ASF was previously detected.

ASF surveillance activities during COVID-19 have not been stopped. These have been performed in a „normal“ modus, as described in the eradication plan of ASF for Slovakia, and taking into account the different sampling schema for different parts of Slovakia (free zone, buffer zones, part I and II).

Ukraine (Anna Shevchenko)

The country situation is quite stable. The outbreaks in the formerly free zones did not provide positivity in WB, both hunted and dead ones. In the affected zones, it is quite high instead in the dead WB (almost 26%), very low in the hunted (0,1%).

Different is the situation in the case of the domestic population, as positivity has been detected in previously free zones in backyard farms and also in commercial and backyard farm in areas which were previously affected.

Discussions

The fear to see WB spreading in new territories when hunting activities increase has not been indicated in the presentations, nor was their presence in the streets as a consequence of the huge lockdown. This will be assessed at a later stage, once the COVID situation is fully under control.

ASF in Asia: situation and new standing group of experts with the GF-TADs for Asia **(Caitlin HOLLEY, OIE Regional Representation for Asia and the Pacific)**

It was highlighted that 12 countries have reported ASF in Asia. Approximately over 6 million pigs dead/culled, Republic of Korea continues reporting on WB, while new cases are reported in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. This disease has a huge impact on the economy because of the production and consumption of pigs.

With regards to China, up to now, a total of 176 outbreaks of ASF have been reported in all the 31 provinces in mainland China, including 6 WB outbreaks. 172 outbreaks have been unblocked. The main transmission routes vary by regions and also change with epidemic progression. Inflation has increased, COVID crises created problems but now prices are stabilizing. Pig production and pig value chains are complex. SGE ASF is playing a pivotal role, focusing on surveillance for early detection and outbreak management, building expertise in order to improve the understanding of the disease.

Key meetings have been carried out since 2018 and the last one was a virtual one where Europe contributed. A number of specific priority topics have been selected (ASF epidemiology, including risk-based surveillance, biosecurity, border control measures, ASF risk communication, socioeconomics, prevention and control strategies, ASF laboratory diagnostics and potential research programmes including ASF vaccine development, wild boar distribution, ecology, management and epidemiological role in swine disease in domestic pigs, outbreak management, the use of zoning and compartmentalisation).

The ASF Regional Collaborative Framework for Southeast (and East) Asia has been created with the objective to prevent the spread and mitigate the impacts of ASF in SE Asia (and East Asia)

FAO, OIE, national and partner are coordinating activities on ASF, working under the GF-TADs label, organising ASF-related webinars, workshop, training.

It fosters open discussions among national, regional and international experts. It is also developing practical, science-based recommendations that can be used in the region to enhance ASF prevention and control.

Summary of the ASF situation in the European Union (European Commission) (Simona Forcella, DG Sante, European Commission)

Since 2014, the situation evolved a lot in Europe and around, applying regionalisation based on risk assessment. The Commission supported member states through various initiatives in the latest months.

During the High-level international conference in Berlin in January 2020, the participants prepared the future of pork production, taking into account the crucial need for coordination and cooperation to achieve results, in the absence of a vaccine.

EFSA has been given five new mandates to be delivered by beginning of 2021, while in January, it published an epidemiological study of the situation in Europe¹

By the end of 2020, all member states with WB must have in place national action plans on wild boar management. The EU is recommending coordinated national efforts and closer partnerships between relevant governmental and non-governmental sectors, to prevent, control and eradicate ASF.

The support of the EU Commission was extended to third countries, with 6 million euros emergency funds allocated, focussing on awareness campaign and passive surveillance.

ASF worldwide epidemiological situation (OIE) (Jee Yong Park, OIE Headquarters, Paris)

Since 2005, a big change is seen in ASF threat around the world. ASF is the biggest animal disease outbreak ever seen, with new events reports received by OIE every week.

A specific attention was paid to ASF during the 87th General Session, with a focus of on biosecurity. The Resolution 33 recognised it as a global priority, launching a global initiative on ASF (2020-2025), in coordination with FAO and Member countries.

This initiative aims at collecting all national and regional efforts to harmonise them and creates a framework to ensure a good coordination. The steps in the development of the strategic plan is based

¹ <https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/5996>

on a theory of change, translated in a logic framework to develop an operational plan, with specific activities to lead to the global control of ASF. All indicators will still be controlled by FAO and OIE.

The Initiative recognises the key factors for success, among which activities will be organised, and identifies 3 objectives: 1) Improve the capability of countries to control ASF, 2) Establish an effective coordination and cooperation framework, 3) Facilitate business continuity.

The SGE on ASF are key points of this strategy. They are encouraged and supported, despite the COVID situation.

Crisis management in case of ASF - wild boar (WB) - Belgian example (Annick Linden, Liège University, Belgium)

The last fresh ASF positive case in Belgium was in August 2019. Since January 2020, only one positive case was found in March. It refers to bones of an emaciated carcass with very low viral load. No active circulation in the forest No domestic pig has been recorded in Belgium.

The epidemic curve is classical, with 2 phases, Belgium now being in the post-epidemic phase.

Control measures evolved, with a strategy regularly adapted to the epidemiological situation and the new positive cases detected, to limit the spread of the disease. The combined actions showed good results. The infected zone is divided in 2 regulated zones. Some restriction has been changed to respect a complete standstill in the provisional infected zone. The active search and removal of the carcasses, maintained since 2018 and risk-oriented, is a priority and shows efficiency. The fences are in connexion with those in France and Luxembourg, sometimes built in advance to anticipate the spread of the disease. The night shots, important tool for the WB depopulation, are only done by administrative staff. Hunting, initially forbidden, now turns to driven hunts while traps are used in the infected zone (160 in total) and the periphery. According to camera traps and observation, 100 WB are in the infected zone.

For each zone, the disease killed twice more WB than hunters one year before. In the regulated zones II and I, 100% WB found dead are tested (for those hunted WB in zone I, it is only 20%, according to the prevalence, the probability to detect the disease and the population estimated in the zone). All carcasses are sent to the rendering plants. This control strategy is adapted, based on the PCR virological results.

All biosecurity measures are maintained, with incentives paid to approved hunters, trained on biosecurity measures if they pack and transport culled WB to the collection centre.

From the passive surveillance outside zones I and II, all results came out negative.

The Belgium authorities are keeping up the pressure to eradicate the disease and avoid an endemic situation. Perspectives of eradication and free status recovery could be planned for autumn 2020

FAO activities on ASF in the Balkans (Daniel Beltran Alcrudo, FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia)

FAO activities on ASF to increase prevention and preparedness in the countries focus in the Balkans, but support is also provided to other countries.

An inception workshop in Belgrade, presented the objectives, outputs and activities, to discuss and fine-tune activities and timeline, in synergy with ongoing activities. It provided training on ASF prevention, preparedness and control, to establish a baseline in terms of preparedness and risk pathways: ASF preparedness checklist and to have a rough ASF risk assessment.

The range of activities is wide. On-site activities, with country missions of simulation exercises (a multi-country simulation exercise is planned in November 2020, with EuFMD support). Training was developed through laboratory training, Train-of-Trainers programmes, on-line training courses (using the material already available in FAO for other diseases), a 4-weeks course in English in April-May 2020, with 500 participants of Europe (a stand-alone module for hunters is planned), and also workshops targeting WB management and hunting biosecurity, organised with hunter associations and stakeholders. ASF risk assessment on entry and spread is also proposed to countries and a wide range of material is made available, technical (videos for clinical examination, diagnostic manual, ...), for cost-benefit analysis, or to develop awareness material, and a mobile application (in the process of translation) was developed to record the information on carcasses.

Last but not least the FAO website is full of useful information and interested parties may also be added to the mailing list to receive updates.

Presentation, discussion and adoption of SGE ASF15 recommendations

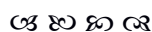
The draft recommendations of the SGE ASF15 were presented by the President and agreed by the SGE ASF15 participants.

Closing REMARKS - Future steps

Two presentation initially planned in the agenda of SGE ASF15 “Emergency management in case of animal health crisis” and the information on the SGE ASF for the Americas have been postponed to the next SGE ASF meeting.

The recommendations will be circulated just after the meeting, leaving a one-week delay for the participants to comment before they can be shared.

The Delegate of Hungary, Lajos Bogнар, informed the participants that Hungary is volunteer to host the next SGE ASF meeting in November 2020. The main topic foreseen would be “**Contingency plans and simulation exercises**”. If the physical meetings would still not be feasible, as for SGE-ASF15, a virtual meeting would be organised.



We would like to sincerely thank the European Union and the OIE for kindly supporting the organisation of the SGE ASF15 teleconference.

All presentations are available on the GF-TADs page of the OIE of the Europe website.