

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

Seventeenth meeting (SGE ASF17) **4th of June 2021 - Teleconference**

REPORT

Summary

Due to the sanitary situation of the COVID-19, the seventeenth meeting of the standing group of experts on African Swine Fever (SGE ASF17), initially planned in Hungary, took place as a teleconference on the 4th of June 2021. 14 SGE Member Countries from the European Region participated, as well as representatives of the Americas and Asia for a total of over 70 participants.

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 online meeting in November 2020.

The SGE ASF17 drafted a set of recommendations. Amongst these, it was highlighted that:

- the recommendations, based on science and on the OIE Standards, that were published by the SGE since 2014 should be considered by all countries to reach the objectives the GFTADs ASF initiative.
- Exit strategies for ASF in Wild Boar populations should be based on ASF status determination, implying appropriate surveillance programmes.
- Two types of strategies have been used with apparent success, either quasi extinction of the host, or progressive decrease in incidence; surveillance is critical to demonstrate freedom from ASF on a two-step approach.
- Passive surveillance is key in evaluating the performance of exit strategies.
- The OIE published ASF Compartmentalisation Guidelines. The link to the guide will be made easily available in the SGE ASF dedicated website.
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The SGE ASF 18 will take place in Hungary in November 2021, if the regional sanitary situation enables it.

Introduction and objectives of the meeting

A very large number of participants (71) attended this 17th meeting of the SGE ASF for Europe.

The President of the Regional Steering Committee of the GF TADs for Europe, **Dr Van Goethem**, congratulated participants for the quality of the work of this group. The 88th General Session of the OIE had elections, and several mandates were renewed. He Congratulated Monique Eloit for her re-election, and the newly elected members of the Council and experts in OIE Specialist Commissions.

Dr Lebedev, the Russian Coordinator, speaking on behalf of the Russian Delegate, wished to add an any other business (AOB) point under. The Russian Federation would welcome the addition of ASF in the list of diseases for which the OIE grants an official status of freedom from certain animal diseases. Dr Van Goethem agreed this could be discussed under AOB.

14 members of the SGE ASF for Europe attended the meeting along with 19 observer countries, and representatives from the European Commission, the FAO, the OIE, the Japanese Veterinary Authority and FESASS and other Organizations. The invitation has been extended to the Presidents of GF-TADs America and Asia. OIE Staff from both regions took part on the meeting.

The topics and format of the meeting have been adapted to the situation. The President invited the speakers to focus their presentation on updating the participants with progress of the ASF situation in their country since the last meeting held in November 2020, with information on the way the Covid-19 crisis impacts on the ASF control and eradication.

Updates from the member countries of the SGE ASF

All the detailed figures are available in the country presentations.

Belarus (Anna Sandul, providing interpretation for Igor Darafeichuk, deputy director of DVPN)

- The last case in wild boar was identified in 2013.
- Surveillance goes on, both active surveillance with 9000 wild boar hunted and tested, and passive surveillance with 65 wild boar found dead; all test results were negative; the same was true of the epidemiological situation for domestic pigs.
- Belarus declared that there was no impact of Covid-19 on surveillance or control activities.

Bulgaria (Daniel Pavlov)

- Bulgaria declared that during passive surveillance, 92% of wild boar were found dead resulted positive to.
- There were no suspicions in domestic pigs since October 2020.
- The main actions on ASF were maintained despite Covid-19. Registration of all backyards and identification of all the pigs in the country is underway.

Czech Republic (Petr Satran)

- The Czechia is officially free of ASF but maintains surveillance. Passive surveillance is kept at a high level with 1700 tests a year on wild boar found dead.
- As a measure to limit population density, intensive hunting is carried out in the zone closest to Germany. A premium is paid for information on wild boar carcasses found dead, boosting passive surveillance.
- Since the beginning of 2021, 1200 tests were carried out in domestic pigs with symptoms suggestive of ASF, but all the results were negative.
- Due to Covid-19 restrictions, there was less hunting, but otherwise surveillance has been carried out as planned. Cooperation with colleagues from neighboring countries and areas is essential.

Estonia (Maarja Kristian)

- All the territory of Estonia is infected. 24% of wild boar found dead were tested positive in the passive surveillance framework. In the last 2 months before the meeting, no additional cases were detected through passive surveillance.
- No suspicions or outbreaks in domestic pigs happened in the same period. The last domestic pig outbreak was in 2017.
- There was no major impact due to the Covid-19 situation.

Germany (Gunda Lubek)

- Cases were present in the very eastern part of Germany (Brandenburg, Saxony), but only in wild boars.
- Due to Covid-19, there was no more collective hunting, no more collective searches for wild boar carcasses, so it is probable that the level of detection through active and passive surveillance was lower than usual.
- There was a brief shortage in ASF staff and materiel because of competition with Covid-19 testing, as well as competition with the needs for HPAI testing.

Hungary (Zsofia Szepesinse Kokany)

- Currently, veterinary services are focusing on passive surveillance.
- There was no major impact of Covid-19 on ASF related activities.
- Veterinary authorities have a goal of lowering the density of the wild boar population to 0.5 per sq. km, to achieve lower transmission.

Latvia (Martins Serzants)

- Since November 50% of the wild boar found dead tested positive; since last summer, there was an increase of about 40% in the findings of dead wild boar because of 30€ premium for information on carcass discovery.
- In domestic pigs, the last ASF outbreak was in July 2020.
- Due to Covid-19, both collective and individual hunting were limited. The rest of the ASF control strategy was performed as planned.

Lithuania (Marius Masiulis)

- Active and passive surveillance confirmed freedom from ASF.
- 95% of Lithuania is infected. 20% of wild boar carcasses found dead gave positive test results. During active surveillance, testing resulted in 0.5% positive in PCR and 2.3% positive in serology.
- There were no outbreaks in domestic pigs to report during the period.
- Covid-19 did not have any major impact, because ASF was a priority.

Moldova (Maxim Sirbu)

- No positive cases were detected in wild boar carcasses found dead in the zone adjacent to Romania.
- 1 suspicion in a backyard farm near Romania was confirmed positive.
- The Covid-19 situation did not have any major impact. The closure of the borders lowered the quantity of illegal goods crossing the border; no cases were detected in wild boar since summer 2020. This absence of new detections leads Moldova to think that they are free from ASF.

Romania (Mihaela Spiridon)

- All the territory of Romania is considered infected. Most outbreaks detected is in domestic pigs, essentially in back yards (600 cases), but some outbreaks were also detected in commercial farms.
- There were numerous findings of PCR positive wild boar carcasses (found dead).
- Covid-19 restricted intervention on backyard outbreaks: in some cases, humans were quarantined, and veterinary services could not enter the premises.

Russian Federation (Nikita Lebedev)

- Regionalization is currently applied inside the Russian Federation, with different administrative divisions considered.
- Since the beginning of 2021, there were 24 outbreaks detected in wild boar carcasses, especially in the Far East (conservation area for Amur Tigers).
- The other regions with outbreaks were essentially in the central-south regions of the Russian Federation. There, surveillance gave 100% PCR positivity in wild boar found dead, as well as in hunted wild boar.
- The largest outbreak to date was detected in domestic animals in the same period, with 462000 pigs culled in a commercial farm in Tverskaya oblast.
- The source of the virus in backyard outbreaks is essentially due to swill feeding.
- This year, there were no issues with Covid-19; restrictions were limited; but some owners did not want to let inspectors in for the inventory because they were afraid of getting infected by the virus.

Serbia (Boban Duric)

- Serbia reported 95% PCR positive in wild boar found dead, and 3% in hunted wild boar; cases are in the south-east of the country.

- Outbreaks in domestic pigs are spreading towards west to the centre of the country. In the period, one big commercial farm was affected.
- There was no major impact of the Covid -19 pandemic on ASF control activities.

Slovakia (Jozef Bires)

- In the period, ASF was detected in regions previously free of the disease. In those regions, surveillance showed 90% of positives in passive surveillance, and 2% in active surveillance. Positive cases were distributed in the eastern and southern parts of the country. The newly affected zones were only concerned by cases in wild boar.
- Covid-19 limited controls in hunting grounds and pig farms; searching of wild boar carcasses was not significantly impacted. Training of hunters was delayed but has started again.
- Slovakia focuses on biosecurity in domestic pigs.

Ukraine (Anna Antonenko)

- During the period, 1 wild boar carcass (found dead) from the hitherto free zone tested positive; no carcasses tested positive within the affected zone (Kiev area).
- In domestic pigs, there were 7 cases in backyards, 4 in commercial farms.
- Covid-19 did not have an impact on the ASF control.

Greece (due to technical difficulties with a microphone, Dr Balbo from the GF TAD Secretariat presented it on behalf of the Greek)

- The situation is calm, there has been no positivity identified in wild boar surveillance.
- In domestic pigs, there were suspicions in backyard farms. These were not confirmed as outbreaks.
- Covid-19 restrictions had an impact on hunting, and on the possibility for veterinary staff to move around.

Dr Reviriego thanked participants for their input. There were no questions and the SGE carried on with the agenda.

ASF in Americas: standing group of experts under the umbrella of the GF-TADs for Americas

Dr Minassian (OIE Representation Americas) spoke on behalf of A. Gonzalez Serrano (FAO Americas)

- The Americas are currently free from ASF.
- In the region, focus is on early detection, and emergency preparedness.
- FAO has focused on the technical capacities in countries and helped them develop contingency planning. Training has been provided, including through the EU-FMD Offices for Europe, and the USDA Aphis.
- The region is developing technical capacities for early detection. There is also a specific focus on the communication strategy, with training for the communication Focal Points.

ASF in Asia: situation and new standing group of experts with the GF-TADs for Asia

Dr Holley spoke on behalf of the OIE Regional Representation for Asia and the Pacific.

- The geographic situation is still evolving. Two new countries were affected in the period, with both Malaysia and Bhutan detecting cases in wild pigs, with non-*Suus scrofa* cases. (In Malaysia, *Suus barbatus* subjects were tested positive, and *Porcula salviana* in Bhutan); in some cases, ASF could lead to species extinction. There has been engagement with wildlife conservation groups active in the area, and work done in the GFTADS ASF SGE Asia on wildlife aspects, including for wild boars (*Suus scrofa*) related in other parts of the region.
- Different strains have been identified in the region. Some may originate with natural mutations; some may come from illegal vaccine strains carrying a signature double deletion. There have been information campaigns on the danger of these non-validated vaccines.
- In the Tripartite plus framework, there is ongoing activity with FAO and IUCN.

Discussion

Moderation by Dr Balbo

Dr Basilidze (Georgia) asked if more information regarding ASF vaccines could be provided, when this could be available commercial/authorised, what can be forecasted?

Dr Holley reminded participants that no vaccines were approved yet. She said that vaccines not approved for use were likely to be more dangerous than useful in the long term.

Dr Linden stated an article from the Plum Island laboratory on a strain attenuated through a single deletion. Plum Island is working on production capacity and might be able to make this strain available. A candidate vaccine would thus be available.

Dr Guberti stated that the attenuated vaccine does not currently provide efficient, long-term immunity in animals. The attenuation does not seem to work properly. It is not reasonable to vaccinate with a strain that retains a capacity for inter-animal spread.

Dr Reviriego summed up that there were warnings on vaccines, as well as some optimism.

ASF: European Commission Activities

(Simona Forcella, DG Sante, European Commission)

Since 2014, the situation evolved considerably in Europe and in the surrounding areas, with regionalisation applied based on risk assessment. The Commission supported member states through various initiatives in the latest months. **Dr Forcella** presented the following points:

- Presentation of the geographical distribution of ASF in the world and in the EU, highlighting that in the EU the disease is mainly present in the Eastern countries and in the wild boar population.
- Some countries are still facing challenges in the domestic pig sector, mainly linked to the peculiarity of the backyard sector.
- To promote recognition and implementation of the International Standards, and of the regionalisation approach a thematic session on ASF was held during a meeting of the SPS WTO in March 2021, upon a Commission proposal.
- The EU value the continuous cooperation with Asia and the Americas on prevention, control, and eradication of ASF.

- The EU ASF legal framework has been updated to consider the entry into force of the Animal Health Law on 21 April 2021, Commission Implementing Decision 2014/709 is no longer in force, and was replaced by Commission Implementing Regulation 2021/605 since 21 of April 2021.
- Regionalization has been successful in avoiding spread in some areas and in enabling eradication in other zones. The EU legislation defines 3 types of zones today:
 - Restricted zone III: ASF present domestic pigs (with or without presence in in wild boar),
 - Restricted zone II: ASF present in wild boar,
 - Restricted zone I: area without ASF virus circulation at high risk and enhanced surveillance zones.

Seven years after the first case in the EU, the situation is still under control. ASF has been eradicated in two countries (Belgium and Czech Republic), and several EU countries did not have any further occurrence in the domestic pigs population (e.g., Estonia and Bulgaria).

FAO activities on ASF in Europe

(Daniel Beltran Alcrudo, FAO Europe and Central Asia)

FAO activities on ASF to increase prevention and preparedness in the countries focus on the Balkans, but support is also provided to other countries. **Dr Beltran Alcrudo** gave explanations on the activities carried out since SGE16:

- On-site activities, with country missions of simulation exercises (a multi-country simulation exercise was carried out in February 2021, with EuFMD support). Many of these activities were developed after suggestion by countries.
- Training was implemented through laboratory training, Training of Trainers programmes, on-line training courses (using the material already available in FAO for other diseases). A multicountry training exercise was held on the 23-24th of February 2021.
- Online training on ASF preparedness has been set up, with more than 1000 participants from 37 countries. The course has been translated into Russian and will be accessible this fall.
- Development of training for hunters in the Balkans with a hands-on approach (training with real carcasses, etc) with standardized content for easily duplicable face-to-face training.
- The FAO has developed a survey for biosecurity rules in hunting, and a tool for training on these same rules. This tool has first been implemented in Kosovo and will be implemented in adjacent countries in the coming months.
- The FAO had procured captive bolts and training on how to use them in laboratories.
- A cost analysis tool has been developed to help in decision making.
- The FAO website is full of useful information and interested parties may also be added to the mailing list to receive updates.

Dr Van Goethem thanked participants for their presentations and welcomed the presentation by EFSA on exit strategies.

EFSA exit strategy (Sofie Dhollander, EFSA)

Dr Dhollander presented the work of the Exit Strategy Subgroup in EFSA.

- The subgroup focused on factors leading to persistence, and on the meaningfulness of persistent seroprevalence in wild boars.
- The subgroup used surveillance data and literature as a model, and defined population profiles.
- A first “screening phase” is recommended, needing low effort but lasting a long time, followed by a “confirmation phase” of high intensity effort in surveillance for a brief period. The duration of the confirmation phase depends on the intensity of the surveillance (sampling), which in turn depends on the availability of wild boar carcasses. For instance, 6 negative carcasses in passive surveillance for 1000km² give a confidence interval of 2.44% that remaining circulation will be missed.
- In old bones PCR detection of viral DNA is not sufficient to establish viral circulation and must be followed by determination of viral viability.
- The sampling recommendations need to be carried out in a way that is as representative and homogeneous as possible.

Dr Van Goethem thanked EFSA and hoped all these recommendations would be put in practice.

ASF Exit strategy practical issues (Vittorio Guberti)

Dr Guberti from ISPRA presented the practical challenges that these strategies meet. He detailed the following points:

- Reminders of the OIE Terrestrial Code on freedom from ASF including expected sensitivity and specificity of the surveillance system in place.
- There are two main strategies to eradicate ASF in wild boar; a) viral eradication achieved through the quasi extinction of the wild boar host population; b) the progressive decrease of incidence achieved through targeted hunting, safe disposal of wild boar carcasses and the enforcement of specific biosecurity measures during hunting.
- In the second strategy (ASF incidence decrease) there is always an epidemiological moment during which the usual active surveillance detects seropositive animals only although the presence of the virus cannot be excluded due to the insufficient sample intensity.
- Because of ASF and eradication measures, the size of the infected wild boar population is reduced hence the number of samples collected through hunting is low as well as the opportunistic probability to find carcasses. In this epidemiological landscape a programmed passive surveillance implemented through the active search of carcasses becomes the sole available tool to prove ASF eradication.
- From the probabilistic point of view, doubling the hunting rate (technically almost impossible to achieve) will only increase the probability of viral detection by 1/3 while doubling the carcass search effort will double the probability to detect the virus, so passive surveillance becomes essential.
- Increasing the sensitivity of the active surveillance targeting seropositive young animals does not make shorter the time needed to achieve the ASF free status whereas it could be highly problematic since animals can retain maternal antibodies for more than 6 months and determining the exact age of this class of animals could be complicated due to –expected– individual variability.
- When the usual active surveillance (screening phase) does not reveal any virus positive samples as well any virus positive carcasses any Country can benefit of this virus silent period

adding a relatively short period of enhanced surveillance (confirmation phase). The length of time of the confirmation phase is inversely correlated to the period of negative results obtained through the usual active surveillance (screening phase).

- Longer is the screening phase without virus detection (even if with a low sensitivity and specificity) shorter will be the confirmatory phase to re-gain – with the desired confidence level – the ASF free status. The confirmatory phase has the scope to make more robust the statistically weak results obtained during the usual screening phase.
- the strategy must be adapted to local situations, taking into account the hunting bag and the wild boar abundance in order to fine tune the size of the epidemiological units (i.e., Hunting grounds, districts, counties) the expected number of negative carcasses and the necessary period of time to achieve the goal.

Discussion

Question from **Dr Serzants** (Latvia): what does the EC think about these exit strategies?

Dr Reviriego stated that these exist strategies needed to be considered by the EC. There is important adaptability in these strategies. There is a need to revise regionalisation, of course, but this will need to be substantiated by the data coming from the best science available.

Dr Reviriego explained that the EU Commission has instruments to make the best use of the model, for their Member States never to work alone. The EU is also ready to share benefits from the collective knowledge developed under GF Tads with countries outside the EU.

Dr Linden thanked for the presentation. She stressed the importance of continuing passive surveillance. In Belgium, there is ongoing passive surveillance since January 2021, and 15 carcasses were detected, all negative. It is very difficult but must be done with all of the available tools (hunters, administration).

Dr Gerbier from France stated in the chat that “Use of dogs has to be further evaluated. In France, most carcasses were found opportunistically, not by dogs or screening. We need also to train the dogs in peace time.”

AOB:

Dr Lebedev thanked the OIE for the publishing of the guidelines for regionalization on ASF. Russia sent a proposal for the listing of ASF as a disease for which countries can attain an OIE official free status. This is important for Russia to limit barriers to trade. Dr Lebedev would like to have colleague’s opinions on this proposal.

Dr Reviriego replied on behalf of the European Commission. He appreciated the Russian proposal, so that an official disease-free status can be given to countries. This would benefit for certain countries, not all Members of the OIE would immediately see it as beneficial. Countries that are free in the EU, for instance, might find it too burdensome. He advocated building consensus in our European region

(53) before advocating outside. He is willing to do this with the 27 EU member states, to understand what the Commission will be proposing if this is brought forward but would advise that not to go too fast if the position is to be defended seriously.

Dr Lebedev said that it could be also submitted to the Asian region. He understands it can be interesting for some countries, and just additional work for others. He stated that, in the session chat, Dr Plavsic has suggested submitting it in the agenda in the Regional Core Group.

For **Dr Van Goethem**, the solution is to start as Dr Reviriego said, starting from the EU 27, then the core group for the OIE Europe, then Asia, and then go higher.

Dr Holley agreed it could be raised in the following SGE in Asia Pacific.

Dr Van Goethem recapitulated the next steps and suggested that the experts on ASF go to Slovakia and Germany, since the sanitary situation is improving.

Presentation, discussion, and adoption of SGE ASF17 recommendations

The draft recommendations of the SGE ASF17 were presented by the President and agreed by the participants.

Dr Balbo added that he is hoping missions would indeed likely be resuming soon.

General issues

- The Standing Group of Experts on African swine fever (SGE ASF) acknowledges that, even in the absence of a vaccine, science-based tools for the prevention, control, and eradication of ASF exist and all countries should fully implement them to fight this deadly disease.
- The SGE ASF since 2014 has been publishing recommendations based on shared experiences and science, all countries should implement previous SGE ASF recommendations to prevent, control and eradicate ASF.
- In addition, the GF-TADs initiative for the Global control of ASF aims to strengthen the capability of countries to control (prevent, respond, eradicate) ASF using OIE standards and best practices that are based on latest scientific evidence. All countries should contribute to reach the objectives of this initiative.
- The SGE ASF briefly addressed including ASF in the list of diseases for which the OIE grant the official recognition of animal health status. The practicability, advantages and disadvantages of such request will need to be further explored at the level of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe, and in other OIE Regions.
- The OIE recently published Compartmentalisation Guidelines. To make the link easily available to interested countries, the OIE Sub-Regional Representation in Bruxelles will add the link to the guidelines to the SGE ASF dedicated website¹.

¹ https://oiebulletin.com/?panorama=05-1-10-2020-1_compartmentalisation

Exit strategy for ASF in wild boar populations.

- The OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code provides for general and specific criteria for the determination of the ASF status of a Country or zone. In this context, an appropriate surveillance programme should be in place, for a certain period, to demonstrate the absence, presence, and distribution of ASF virus infection and to monitor the trend of the disease.
- Several SGE ASF members (and former members) have been applying two main strategic approaches in eradicating ASF in wild boar: (i) virus eradication through the **quasi-extinction of the infected wild boar population** following its fencing, through fencing the infected area, ban of almost any activities, culling of the animals in the fence (e.g., Czechia and Belgium); and (ii) virus eradication through **progressive decrease of incidence**, through zoning, targeted hunting, economical and leisure activities allowed and biosecurity measures.
- Countries should approach the control and eradication of ASF considering the lengthy experience of the SGE ASF members and adapt it to national and local settings.
- The different ASF surveillance strategies were recently assessed to provide evidence of absence of virus circulation in wild boar (Exit Strategy) when the eradication approach is based on the progressive decrease of incidence. A **two-phased** approach (screening phase, followed by a confirmation phase) is suggested as a approach for an ASF Exit Strategy in wild boar populations. This science-based approach could be considered by countries designing, implementing and assessing a surveillance system to demonstrate freedom from ASF.
- The accuracy of the Exit strategy increases with increasing number of carcasses collected and tested. Surveillance information gathered by seroprevalence in wild boar would have a limited impact on the performance of the exit strategy; **passive surveillance is key**. Countries should concentrate surveillance efforts on wild boar carcass search, testing and removal.

Next meeting

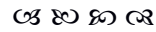
- The eighteenth meeting (SGE ASF18) of the Standing Group of Experts on African Swine Fever in Europe under the GF-TADs umbrella should be held virtually, in **November 2021**. The date and the modalities of the meeting will be decided depending on the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The focus of the next meeting will be on ‘Challenges, role and management of backyards and outdoor farming in the framework of ASF prevention, control and eradication’.
- [14](#) Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine

Closing REMARKS –

Dr Van Goethem, President of the Steering Committee of the GF TADs for Europe, stressed the importance of following science in the creation of our strategies for the prevention, control and eradication of ASF.

Dr Balbo explained that November 2021 might be a date when travel will have resumed, and that countries having formerly expressed readiness to host the next SGE ASF meeting in November 2021

might still be willing to do so. The main topic foreseen would be **challenges, role and management of backyards and outdoor farming in the framework of ASF prevention, control, and eradication**. If the organisation of physical meetings is still not a possibility, as for SGE-ASF15 and ASF SGE 16, a virtual meeting will be organised.



We would like to sincerely thank the European Union and the OIE for kindly supporting the organisation of the SGE ASF17 teleconference.

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