

Rapid advice 07-2019 of the Scientific Committee established at the FASFC on a draft royal decree amending the royal decree of 18 June 2014 related to measures for the prevention of notifiable swine diseases and evaluation of measures related to the conditions for repopulation of pig holdings in areas infected with African swine fever and related to transport and gathering of pigs

Terms of reference

Following the introduction of African swine fever (ASF) virus in the wild fauna (wild boars) of the province of Luxembourg and its geographical dispersion, measures must be taken to verify, maintain or improve the biosecurity of Belgian pig holdings. In this context, the Scientific Committee is requested to provide a rapid advice on:

1. the draft royal decree amending the royal decree of 18 June 2014 on measures for the prevention of notifiable swine diseases;
2. the opportunity of a ban on the repopulation of pig holdings having become empty without stamping out order in areas infected with African swine fever;
3. the lifting of a ban on the gathering of slaughter pigs and the banning of unloading gilts on the same vehicle, in different pig holdings, (namely the relaxing of measures decided in the ministerial decree of 26 September 2018 on emergency measures concerning the control of African swine fever, mainly those limiting the transport and gathering of pigs).

Methods

The rapid opinion is based on expert opinion and data from the scientific literature.

Conclusions and recommendation

The Scientific Committee recognizes that the proposed amendments to the royal decree of 18 June 2014 related to measures to prevent notifiable swine diseases are a necessary response to the evolution of the epidemiological situation of ASF in Belgian wildlife. However, certain crucial points remains to be reinforced or better explained.

Some of the proposed prevention measures have very little scientific basis (such as the 72-hour withdrawal period) or have only limited effectiveness, or even increase the risk of contamination if they are incorrectly used (e.g. footbaths). For the Scientific Committee, some of the key external biosecurity measures are meant to reduce the risk of introduction of epidemic diseases:

- hands washing by any person (operator, veterinarian, other occasional visitor) who enters the farm;
- cleaning and disinfection of all types of equipment (boots, tools, etc.) entering the holding;
- the use of clothing and boots (which are necessarily cleaned and then disinfected) or overboots provided by the farm;
- the prohibition of introduction into the farm of any object that has been used in another herd or in a risk area and that cannot be cleaned and disinfected (pallet, pallet truck, liquid manure pipes, pipes for the delivery of the food, etc.);
- to pay attention to the origin of the feed, the drinking water and bedding for the animals.

The Scientific Committee draws the attention to the fact that some farms will remain particularly at risk for the introduction of epidemic diseases despite this royal decree, in particular:

- recreative/pedagogical farms because of the frequent contacts in this type of holdings between pigs and different people unfamiliar with biosecurity neither with challenges associated to porcine epidemic diseases;
- open-air holdings or holdings with an open air-access because this type of exploitation is particularly at risk for direct contact with wild boars;
- non-commercial farms because they receive derogations regarding the infrastructure to be implemented in terms of biosecurity.

The Scientific Committee emphasized some of the minimal qualitative elements for the 'risk assessment form' (the Scientific Committee prefers the terms 'biosecurity assessment form') which is mentioned in the royal decree.

The stamping out of the pig holdings located in the initially infected area allowed temporarily to decrease the risk associated with the introduction of ASF virus in pig holdings. However, the Scientific Committee is of the opinion that it is proportionate to let both stamping out or repopulation depend upon the result of the biosafety assessment of a holding in the ASF risk zone in the scenario of geographical spread of ASF in wildlife or the presence of an endemic disease.

The Scientific Committee is of the opinion that the measure regarding the relaxation of the conditions for the transport of pigs may lead to increase the risk of several different geographical introductions if gathered pigs are in contact with pigs that could be infected with ASF. For the Scientific Committee, this relaxation is therefore not appropriate. On the other hand, the Scientific Committee is of the opinion that the use of gathering centers (certified class 2 gathering centers) before sending pigs directly to the slaughterhouse is not likely to increase the risk of spread of ASF, provided that all pigs loaded on the vehicle have the same gathering collection center as sole destination and that the loading area of the pigs is in such suitable conditions to avoid any type of contact with the pigs remaining on the holding.

The Scientific Committee makes different recommendations regarding:

- the general and especially the external biosecurity of pig holdings; the concept and the parameterization of the form that will be used for the biosecurity assessments (recommendation to base this on a specific opinion of the Scientific Committee);
- the education of veterinarians in the field in relation to biosafety in a broad sense and the use of the forms;
- the drafting by the authorities of instructions relating to guidance in carrying out the action plans.

The full text is available on this website in dutch and in french.