



**Opening Statement by IFA Pigs Committee  
to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine  
Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> December 2020, 10.30am**

***African Swine Fever and the threat to the Irish Pig Sector***

Chairman and Committee Members,

Thank you for inviting IFA to address you here today. My name is Robert Malone and I am the IFA Pigs Policy Executive. I am joined by Shane McAuliffe a member of the IFA Pigs Committee. We are also joined remotely Roy Gallie IFA Pigs Chairman and Tipperary pig farmer David Ronan.

African Swine Fever has the potential to cause devastation to Ireland's third largest agricultural sector.

Pig farming in Ireland has consolidated over the past 40 years due to the economic volatility and tight margin of the worldwide pork market, and today 265 pig farms produce 4 million pigs annually. In 2019, the pig sector generated exports valued at €950m. That is an increase of 300% in the past 10 years, and represents an average export output of €3.5m from the average Irish pig farm.

While reliance on the UK market has decreased it still represents 45% of our export value, but encouraging 25% of export value of Irish pigmeat goes to China. Through great work by both

DAFM<sup>1</sup> and Bord Bia on trade missions, new emerging international markets are becoming more accessible to Irish exports and these hard-won markets need to be protected.

The sector employs 8,000<sup>2</sup>, with 1,200 on farms and 6,800 in associated industries.

### **African Swine Fever (ASF)**

The purpose of today's address is to highlight the enormous threat of ASF to our pigmeat sector.

African swine fever (ASF) is a viral disease of domestic and wild pigs, with no threat to human health.

The disease has been around since the early 1900s in the African continent and spread to Spain in 1957. It was eradicated from European countries in the 1990s with the exception of Sardinia where it has remained endemic since 1978.

ASF can be characterised as a virulent virus which causes up to 100% pig mortality. There is no vaccine or treatment available for ASF, so strict biosecurity measures are the only option to prevent the introduction and spread of the disease.

The most recent and significant transcontinental spread was seen when the disease reached Georgia in 2007 and has since spread to a further 13 countries: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Moldova, Czech Republic, Romania and Hungary and most recently Beluga and German.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 2018, the Chinese Animal Disease Control Centre confirmed the first case of ASF in the country, in a pig dense area 280km from the North Korean border. With over half

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

<sup>2</sup> Teagasc

of the world's total population of pigs, the pig herd in China was decimated by 50% due to ASF over the course of 2019.

### **Risk factors for the spread of ASF to Ireland**

An outbreak of ASF which would restrict Irish pigmeat exports dramatically and would have a catastrophic effect on the industry.

The German pig industry, exported over €1b worth of pigmeat to China in 2019. Its authorisation to export was completely removed by Chinese authorities after ASF was discovered in wild boar in an isolated part of east Germany in September this year.

This has wiped millions worth of euros off the weekly value of the German pig sector and reduced the farmer pig price from over €1.70c/kg to €1.20c/kg.

It is recognised that €1.50c/kg is a break-even figure for sustainable pig production across Europe, and the consequences of the ASF outbreak in Germany will be felt for years to come. It is worth noting that no commercial pig in Germany contracted ASF, only wild boar and yet the industry is in turmoil.

In Ireland we do not have a wild boar population, but there are many other risks of introducing ASF into the country. While 265 commercial pig farmers produce the over 99% of Ireland's pigmeat, there are a total of 1,641 active herds registered with the Department of Agriculture along with many other unregistered backyard pigs. These represent a high threat to the entire industry.

ASF is mainly spread through pig-to-pig contact but there is also a risk of contamination food, feed and equipment bringing ASF into Ireland.

International travel is a high risk and while COVID-19 has reduced incoming visitors to Ireland by up to 80% this year, travel will return in time and with it the associated risk of bringing ASF into Ireland from continental Europe.

### **Preventative Measures**

A whole society approach is needed to prevent the spread of any viral disease of livestock and this is no different for ASF and pigs. Bio-security of our island is the key to keeping Ireland free of ASF

### **International biosecurity**

Ireland follows the measures to be applied within the EU<sup>3</sup> for the control of ASF. The EU<sup>4</sup> provides for control measures of pig products and prohibiting the movement of pigmeat that originate in ASF infected countries in order to prevent the further spread of the disease across the EU.

### **National and regional biosecurity**

This EU legislation is implemented and enforced at a national level here in Ireland by the Department of Agriculture, who have various literature published in relation to ASF. These include an information leaflet for all pig herd owners on the clinical signs of ASF, the importance of good biosecurity measures and a reminder that swill feeding is illegal in Ireland<sup>5</sup>.

An information leaflet for veterinary practitioners has also been published.

As mentioned previously, in general, those who have backyard pigs have poorer biosecurity standards than commercial pig farmers and pose a bigger risk of introducing and spreading ASF.

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<sup>3</sup> Council Directive 2002/60/EU

<sup>4</sup> Commission Implementing Decision 2014/709/EU

<sup>5</sup> Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine 2017

The Department of Agriculture has published a leaflet which was issued to all registered keepers of non-intensive and pet pigs, detailing biosecurity measures and explaining that swill feeding is illegal.

The risk of passengers unknowingly bringing high risk food items into the country needs to be addressed now while international travel is at its lowest. Irish Customs need to carry out random stop and search procedures to check for any passengers carrying pigmeat or pig products into Ireland.

Irish pig farms also have a large number of international workers and it is essential that Irish pig farm managers remind staff travelling to ASF infected countries that they cannot bring such products into Ireland, and that if they were in contact with pigs abroad, they need to observe strict quarantine protocols.

### **Farm Biosecurity**

The IFA works closely with the Department of Agriculture, the National Disease Control Centre (NDCC) and Teagasc's Pig Department to ensure all pig farmers are aware of the risks associated with ASF, and that the correct bio-security measures are in place.

### **Concluding remarks**

While an outbreak of ASF in Ireland would be lower risk than many other EU nations due to our island status and lack of wild boar population, there is still a constant threat of the disease being introduced.

All pig owners need to remain vigilant, be aware of the risks and carry out biosecurity measures.

There needs to be increased funding and measures implemented by both the National Disease Control Centre and Border Inspection Posts Division at all ports of entry.

The economic impact of the German ASF outbreak and its effect on the global pigmeat trade is yet to be seen to its full extent, but we cannot afford to let the Irish pig industry be exposed to any preventable risks.

Thank you