

Editorial

The risk from African swine fever

AS Brexit looms ever closer, we are still in the dark about many of the changes – and risks – that will arise from the UK leaving the European Union.

The potential impact on the veterinary world is likely to be significant in many areas, as anyone who regularly reads *Vet Record* will realise – from animal welfare, medicines, workforce issues, pet travel and trade, to name but a few.

This week we report on one more issue – biosecurity. The House of Lords European Union Committee has published a report ‘Brexit: plant and animal biosecurity’ (p 518).

Although the report covers both plant and animal biosecurity, there are some specific points for the veterinary sector to consider.

Unsurprisingly, the report highlights the reliance on EU citizens in providing official veterinarian capacity in the UK, and the need to retain or recruit people to these public health roles after Brexit.

The report also makes clear that due to geographical proximity, the EU will remain a ‘key source of biosecurity risks to the UK’. It calls for continued alignment with the EU to maintain trade, but also states that the ‘need to facilitate trade post-Brexit must not be allowed to compromise the UK’s biosecurity’.

The importance of maintaining good biosecurity is highlighted in an article by the UK’s chief veterinary officer (CVO), Christine Middlemiss (pp 522-523), on the risks to the UK’s pig industry from an incursion of African swine fever (ASF).

ASF has been spreading across the Caucasus region and Europe since an outbreak in Georgia in 2007. ASF was detected in the EU in 2014 and in mid-September this year was found in dead wild boar in Belgium. The subsequent and major effect on the Belgian pig industry illustrates why it is important to keep these diseases out of the UK.

The UK’s geography does offer it some protection over other European countries. Wild boar are part of the disease picture, so the UK is protected by its coastal waters from wandering infected boars.

However, wild boar are certainly not the whole story, and other risks remain.

China – the world’s largest pork consumer at around 50 million tons a year – identified swill

feeding and long-distance transport of pigs, along with the use of spray-dried porcine plasma in feed, as the reasons behind the introduction and quick spread of the virus in its recent outbreaks.

Anyone with even a passing interest in ASF will be unsurprised by these findings – it is certainly not new information. Back in 2013, this journal published a commentary piece by Chris Oura highlighting the risk from the encroaching ASF outbreaks in eastern Europe in which he stated that: ‘care should also be taken not to import pig products from infected areas or feed uncooked products to pigs’. Even then these were well-known risks.

Research we published last year by Claire Guinat and colleagues looked at the effectiveness and the practicality

of various control strategies. Active surveillance and carcase removal of wild boar were rated as the most effective surveillance and intervention strategies, but also the least practical due to the challenges of monitoring wild boar populations and also accurately detecting the disease.

Progress is being made on developing a vaccine, but the virus has a large, complex protein, making a vaccine difficult to produce.

So, what can UK vets do? Swill feeding in the UK has been illegal for many years, after it was identified as a contributing factor in the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. So the advice given by the CVO of only feeding pigs legally permitted food should be reiterated to pig owners.

Good biosecurity is also key. We published a useful article in *In Practice* in July by John Carr and Mark Howells on biosecurity on farms. It is this and other resources that can help you, as vets, give great biosecurity advice to your farming clients to help keep ASF and other exotic diseases exactly that – exotic to the UK.

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