News

Canada cannot let ‘our guard down’ in African Swine Fever fight: Chief Vet

Published on May 6, 2019 11:58am By Kelsey Johnson.

<https://ipolitics.ca/2019/05/06/canada-cannot-let-our-guard-down-in-african-swine-fever-fight-chief-vet/>

Government and industry must remain vigilant as officials continue to try and keep a deadly hog virus that has killed millions of pigs globally out of this country, Canada’s chief veterinarian says.

“The main thing is to not let our guard down,” Dr. Jaspinder Komal told iPolitics in an interview Friday. “We are not done yet. We will be done when the global situation starts going down; only then can we take a breather, but for now we will continue to work on this so that (African Swine Fever) doesn’t hit Canada.”

Canada’s pork industry is on edge thanks to an ongoing outbreak of African Swine Fever, a deadly virus that has ravaged China’s pork industry and infected herds in a number of countries around the world.

The Ebola-like virus, which does not pose a threat to human health or food safety but is deadly for pigs, is a “human driven disease,” Komal said, since the virus can be spread by direct and indirect contact. “Everybody has a role to play here.”

African Swine Fever causes fever, internal bleeding and high death rates in domestic and wild pigs. Exposure to a tiny amount of African Swine Fever can kill upwards of 90 per cent of a herd. There is no cure or vaccine for the virus.

On Friday, Komal said, the “fundamentals are in place” in Canada as experts here try to prevent African Swine Fever from entering the country. Those actions include feed import restrictions, heightened border controls at Canadian airports to deter passengers from bringing in illicit meat, a plan to train more detector dogs and a wider public awareness campaign through social media.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), he said, already has a national emergency response plan that has been deployed in previous disease outbreaks, including avian influenza and bovine tuberculosis.

“Where our thinking will advance is to create a national action plan for Canada, and we are encouraging other countries to do the same,” Komal said, adding that, once developed, Canada will practise the specific African Swine Fever plan with industry and provincial counterparts.

No cases of African Swine Fever have been reported in the Americas, but the disease is spreading rapidly around the world, with cases reported in regions including Mongolia, Vietnam, China, Japan, Cambodia, North Korea and parts of Europe.

One of the biggest outbreaks is in China, where officials have said more than a million pigs have been killed since the virus struck in February 2018. “Are the over the battle right now? I didn’t get the sense, and reasonably so, because it is a disease that takes time to be taken under control,” Komal said when asked about the Chinese outbreak and concerns around the accuracy of Chinese reporting.

“I think they are on the right track, and the sense I got is that they are making the right efforts,” he added.

Still, the country’s top veterinarian said there remains more work to be done on the African Swine Fever front, with more conversations planned with industry, government and international counterparts in the coming weeks and months.

“We need to do more on the wildlife side so we will be talking to our colleagues in the federal government as well as in the provincial government because it’s a shared jurisdiction,” Komal said, adding those actions would include better data and monitoring of wild pigs.

More work can also be taken on the biosecurity front. “As we are gearing up into this, we want to continue to empathize the best defence is protecting that farm,” he said.

That includes ensuring wild pigs aren’t crossing paths with domestic pigs.

“I’m not worried about the commercial productions because they have a very high level of biosecurity, although they can continue to be more vigilant,” Komal said. “But we are going to put more emphasis on backyard pigs to ensure wild pigs are not coming to contact with domestic pigs. So more actions will be taken in that area.”

When asked whether he thought Canada could prevent the virus from entering the country, Komal said the CFIA is working on “both fronts.”

“The first is to keep it away. We are also working, if it comes to Canada, what actions and how prepared are we,” he said, noting that plan includes considering the potential economic, social welfare (including producer mental health) and animal health actions are being considered.

Canada and United States recently co-chaired a two-day international forum on African Swine Fever in Ottawa. More than 150 animal health, industry and government experts from some 15 countries attended the forum. Officials from the World Animal Health Organization (OIE) and the United Nations’ Food And Agriculture Organization (FAO) were also in attendance.

Komal said officials from the Americas have decided to strike a working group in order to better collaborate on prevention, potential response plans and information sharing around African Swine Fever. A similar working group is already in place among Asian nations.