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Second African Swine Fever Case in Hong Kong

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Agriculture in the News

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Report Highlights:

Hong Kong confirmed the second case of African Swine Fever in the city's largest slaughterhouse on May 31, 2019 just three weeks after confirmation of the first case. The Hong Kong government indicated that the pig came from a farm in Meichow, a city in the northeast of Guangdong province in mainland China. The incident led to the culling of the 4,100 pigs in the slaughterhouse and the closing of the facility for disinfection, which is expected to take four days. China has suspended all live pig supplies to Hong Kong for the time being.

The Hong Kong government announced the second case of African Swine Fever (ASF) in the evening of May 31, 2019. The pig imported from China stayed in the Sheung Shui slaughterhouse for six days before dying. Local inspectors tested the dead pig and confirmed the ASF virus. Legislators questioned why pigs are allowed to stay in the abattoir for that long when the guideline is set for three days. The academy also voiced the concern that the longer pigs stay in slaughterhouse, the higher possibility of spreading the virus.

The government started culling all 4,100 pigs in the slaughterhouse the following day, June 1, 2019. The thorough cleansing and disinfection of the slaughterhouse is to be completed within four days.

The government will compensate the industry for the culling of animals. The compensation amount is expected to reach HKD18 million or USD2.3 million. (The compensation budget for the first ASF case three weeks ago was about HKD20 million or USD2.6 million for the culling of 6,000 pigs.)

Meanwhile, China has suspended supplying live pigs to Hong Kong, leaving locally-raised pigs as the only source of freshly slaughtered pork in the city.

Sheung Shui is Hong Kong's largest slaughterhouse, handling about 4,000 pigs and 40 cattle each day. As there has been no case of ASF in the other, smaller slaughterhouse, that operation is open, but its capacity is about 400 pigs each day, about one-tenth the capacity of Sheung Shui.

Given the drastic shortage of fresh pork, retail prices have spiked between 60 to 100 percent in various districts. Many market stalls have planned to stop doing business for several days and consumers have switched to buying chilled/frozen meats due to its relative affordability. Some shops have indicated about a 20 percent increase in the sales of chilled/frozen meats.

Government's Reaction

Since the first ASF case, the Hong Kong government has strengthened the surveillance and monitoring of the live pigs supply to Hong Kong. The spokesperson said inspectors check all live pigs at the border and veterinarians check them again before they go into the slaughterhouse.

The public has urged the government to come up with an effective policy to deal with ASF. The government has indicated that they are exploring the possibility to prohibit live pigs from staying overnight in slaughterhouse, believing that this measure could effectively contain the spread of virus and minimize economic loss. (After the many periodic recurrences of avian influenza years ago, Hong Kong forbid live chicken to stay overnight in local markets. All live chickens that remain in the market at the end of each business day are culled and stored in refrigerated equipment.)

The industry immediately responded that the suggestion was impractical. They explained that it is not possible to sell all the imported pigs each day. A maximum of 36 hours might be a possible option.

The government and the industry have not reached a consensus on this issue.

Sheung Tsui Slaughtering Plant

The Sheung Tsui slaughtering plant is owned by the Hong Kong government, with operation rights granted to Ng Fung Hong, a quasi-Chinese government state company in Hong Kong, since the opening of the slaughterhouse. A new contract has been awarded to Ng Fung Hong again after the tendering process at a price of HKD264 million (USD33.9 million) for a term of six years. The new contract will last from August 1, 2019 to July 31, 2025.

Reportedly, the Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department included some new tendering conditions for the contract. New measures include a management and surveillance plan in connection with epidemic diseases and also a computer traceability system of all carcasses. The system must be in place before the commencement of the contract.