

An inhumane and dangerous practice

Written by Annie Schreijer-Pierik on 25 April 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

China's burying of pigs alive in an effort to control African Swine Fever is a brutal method of culling that also poses health risks, explains Annie Schreijer-Pierik.



Photo credit: Adobe Stock

Since late last year, China has been accused of inhumane treatment on animals. So, what has been going on?

Since August 2018, China has faced the growing spread of a fatal disease in domesticated pigs, called the African Swine Fever (ASF).

There have been over 100 confirmed cases of the disease, which has led to the slaughter of roughly 1,000,000 pigs in an effort to control the outbreak.

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Culling is the tried and tested method of controlling ASF. However, what is happening in China is that the pigs are cruelly slaughtered by burying them alive.

Videos on Twitter show thousands of pigs being brought to a pit and pushed in by machines.

Witness statements corroborate that the pigs are then buried alive. Previous videos from last autumn even show pigs being burned alive.

“The virus can survive in dead tissue, it could potentially leach into the soil or into water sources, meaning there is no saying how long it will last or how far the disease could travel”

These acts of animal cruelty in China are in clear breach of the international OIE (World Organisation for Animal Health of which it is a member) standards on the Killing of Animals for Disease Control Purposes.

These standards clearly state that “when animals are killed for disease-control purposes, methods used should result in immediate death or immediate loss of consciousness lasting until death.”

China’s actions are of significant concern and need to be responded to swiftly.

Not only is burying animals alive an extremely inhumane and brutal culling option, it also poses numerous health risks.

There is no known treatment for ASF; once a case has been confirmed the disease can spread quickly from pig to pig.

The only way to control it is through mandatory culling, but the ASF virus is incredibly persistent, surviving even in dead tissue.

Tests have shown the virus can even survive in meat that has been cooked through. Research is yet to determine its full longevity.

Farmers in China may be burying the animals alive in order stop the spread by reducing the amount of blood.

However, given that the virus can survive in dead tissue, it could potentially leach into the soil or into water sources, meaning there is no saying how long it will last or how far the disease could travel.

It could end up infecting pigs using the same water source hundreds of miles away. If humans also use that water source, they could transfer the disease even further.

The long-term and biosecurity risks posed by the mass burial of pigs infected with ASF are unknown and should be taken into consideration, particularly given regular trade between China and the EU.

There have been 619 detected cases of ASF in Belgium to date.

Animal welfare charity, Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), said it had written to the Chinese Ambassador urging the authorities in Beijing “to halt this cruel killing method as a matter of urgency”.

The EU also needs to do the same; it recognises animals as sentient beings and has instituted Directives on animal welfare - China is clearly in violation of their obligations as a member of the OIE.

If the EU is to condemn these actions and reduce the risk of the disease spreading to Europe, then the Commission needs to immediately raise these animal welfare violations with China and incorporate animal welfare provisions into their bilateral trade agreements.

Otherwise, without international pressure, China could easily continue its inhumane treatment of animals without repercussions, posing a health risk to both the EU and the rest of the world.

About the author

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