

Swine Virus Epidemic Sweeping the Nation

The swine virus sweeping the nation has already killed 4 million pigs in the last year, said Dr. Carter, Oklahoma State University swine herdsman and associate professor.

This virus is known as porcine epidemic diarrhea, Carter said. He said the first case in the United States was reported in April 2013.

“It causes severe diarrhea and dehydration in baby pigs,” said Roy Lee Lindsey, Oklahoma Pork Council executive director. “They simply cannot absorb enough fluids to survive.”

An estimated 400,000 hogs have died since the first case was reported in Oklahoma, Lindsey said. Across the country, between 2.5 million to 5 million market hogs have been lost to PEDv, he said.

“Most folks don’t understand we breed sows to have a certain number of pigs born every week on commercial operations,” Lindsey said. “You’re going to lose three to five weeks’ worth of pigs.”

This is about 10 percent of commercial production pigs, he said.

“Generally in a naïve herd, which has not been exposed before, 100 percent mortality is not uncommon in pigs one to two weeks of age,” Carter said.

Older pigs handle PEDv better, he said. They will still have diarrhea and vomit, but mortality rates decline, Carter said.

“They get the diarrhea and stop growing and stop eating for a little bit,” Carter said. “After that, they continue on. The mortality is really in the very young pigs.”

Rice Polands, in Velma, Okla., is one of the only noncommercial confirmed cases in Oklahoma, said Raymond Rice, owner of Rice Polands.

“It not only has taken an economical toll on my family, but also an emotional one,” Rice said.

“When I found the first piglet, I’d hoped it was a strain of E. coli scowers,” Rice said. “I didn’t want to jump to conclusions or believe what I thought it was.”

He has lost eight litters since the virus broke out on his farm two weeks ago, he said. Rice said since there is no cure, they have to let the virus run its course, which usually takes about 10 to 12 days.

PEDv symptoms start showing after 12 hours, he said. For anything less than a week old, the disease is fatal, Rice said.

“Anyone in the livestock industry is emotionally attached to their livestock,” Rice said. “This is just devastating.”

Although this disease has taken a toll on their herd and family, Rice said they will let it run its course and be stronger after it is over.

“One of the worst things is, we have no idea how it got there,” Rice said.

Rice Polands increased biosecurity and took necessary preventative steps, he said.

“We haven’t let anyone on the farm for the last 30 days,” Rice said. “There hasn’t even been a feed truck here.”

The main way PEDv is transported is through fecal matter, Lindsey said. He said it also can be an airborne disease in dry situations when dust in the air contains substances the virus is spread through.

“Most of it is pig to pig contact,” Carter said, “but if you aren’t bringing other pigs into your farm the entry point is people or some other route.”

He said birds and rodents can carry it, as well.

Some boars have not been able to produce because the virus can be carried through the semen, Carter said. He said this could have an effect on livestock shows in the future because less market hogs are being produced right now.

“For the show-pig industry in Oklahoma, we really haven’t seen it until the last two weeks,” Carter said. “It didn’t hurt anything up until then, but going forward from now may be a different story.”

There is a chance fewer exhibitors will travel to shows for the fear of bringing the virus back to their herd, Carter said.

The show-pig industry just started getting hurt by PEDv, but the commercial industry has felt it more, Lindsey said.

The value of a weaned pig three weeks of age has been as high as \$110 since PEDv hit Oklahoma, but now, the price is back down to \$80, he said.

“Even if you use \$80 a head on 400,000 pigs, you’re talking about \$32 million in lost revenue,” Lindsey said.

Hogs being fed out to market weight sell for about \$275 per head, he said. With approximately 400,000 pigs lost, this means \$110 million in potential revenue is lost, Lindsey said.

“With fewer pigs, the market prices have sky-rocketed,” Carter said.

Right now, there are fewer hogs coming to market because of the outbreaks, Lindsey said. There is an expected decrease of market hogs in June and July because of when some outbreaks have occurred, he said.

“As a result, we have seen the futures market for June and July at record highs,” Lindsey said.

This summer, market prices are estimated to be \$1.20 per pound, and live hog prices will be 90 cents per pound, he said.

“This is not the time of year we would normally see those kinds of prices,” Lindsey said. “I’ve been with the Oklahoma Pork Council for 16 years and have never seen prices that high.”

High prices could benefit some hog farmers, Carter said.

“If you can avoid getting the disease, you have a real opportunity to benefit from reduced supply and increased price,” Lindsey said.

“There are those saying this is a once in a generation opportunity for producers,” he said, “but obviously, if you lose three to four weeks of baby pigs and don’t have pigs to market, you don’t see this as much of an opportunity.”

It could also help those who have lost high quantities of pigs, Carter said.

“With market hogs so valuable now, it has tremendously helped producers who have lost pigs because their older ones are worth a lot more,” Carter said.

PEDv has caused economic uproar, but also it affects people emotionally, Lindsey said.

“In many cases, we are having to euthanize a significant number of these baby pigs because they are dying and suffering, and there is nothing we can do for them,” Lindsey said.

It takes a significant emotional toll on employees to have to euthanize those quantities of animals because they were trained to try their best to keep those animals healthy, alive and comfortable, he said. People in the hog industry are taking extreme preventative measures, Carter said.

“Biosecurity has always been one of the important aspects of any hog farm,” Carter said. “It has been ramped up tremendously with this virus.”

Farmers are paying more attention to trucks carrying feed and equipment, he said. They are limiting people movement in-and-out of farms, Carter said.

“We have had to invest in new technologies to help try to prevent the spread of the disease,” Lindsey said.

New truck washes, trailers, policies and procedures are being implemented to try to prevent PEDv transportation, he said. Movement of trucks from farm to farm without being cleaned is being limited, also, Lindsey said.

“The biggest prevention method is following good biosecurity protocols,” he said.

Many producers are putting in new truck washes, Lindsey said. They also are requiring employees to shower before and after going into the hog pens, Carter said.

“[Prevention techniques] go from blood testing of animals coming into farms to trying to keep birds and rodents out of the farm,” Carter said.

There is no cure for PEDv right now, Lindsey said. However, the National Pork Board has been conducting research for one, Carter said.

“The National Pork Board is putting millions of dollars into research,” Carter said. “Most of it is on how it is spread, what the routes of exposure are, and how to reduce those.

“The first thing we need to know is how to test for it because it is brand new,” he said.

Because the virus is now traceable by the USDA, there is a better chance for a vaccine being made, Carter said. However, it might get worse before it gets better, he said.

“If you talk to the people in the [Oklahoma] panhandle, it has hit bad,” Carter said.

In Oklahoma, PEDv has been mostly confined to the panhandle, but the last couple weeks there was an outbreak southwest Oklahoma, he said.

“Can we keep it from the rest of the state?” he asked. “Based on other states, it’s going to be very difficult.”

North Carolina was clean for a while, but once PEDv was spread to one farm, it was all over the state, Carter said.

“We’ll battle it,” Carter said. “We’ll figure it out and find out how to deal with it.”