

ESPHM 2014: Italy's Pig Sector Held Back by Health Concerns

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ITALY - The European Symposium on Porcine Health Management (ESPHM) opened today in Sorrento with a review of the Italian pig industry. Senior editor, Jackie Linden, reports.

Mount Vesuvius formed the impressive backdrop to the venue of the ESPHM 2014, the sixth in the series, which is being hosted by the Italians in the delightful town of Sorrento, just south of Naples.

Almost 1,300 pig veterinarians from 47 countries across the globe have gathered for the three-day meeting, which offers keynote speeches, oral presentations and posters on a wide range of topics related to pig health.

It has become a tradition at these conferences for the first presentation to set the scene, offering an overview of the host nation's pig industry. At this meeting, the challenge was accepted by Davide Calderone, representing the national association of pig producers and pig meat processors, ASSICA.

One of the key features of pig production in Italy is that pigs are reared to heavy weights and for longer than most other European countries - 170kg and nine months of age - making them ideal for the production of traditional cured meats such as Parma ham and San Daniele ham as well as other deli products for which Italy is renowned.

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"Minimum trimmed weight of a Parma ham is 10kg."

Production has risen by almost 30 per cent since 1985 from 930,000 tonnes to 1.2 million tonnes in 2012. 2013 figures are not yet available but Mr Calderone said the trend has continued in the last year.

Over the same almost 30-year time period, it is the production of cured hams that has helped to push up the total volume, increasing its share from 18 per cent in 1985 to 25 per cent in 2012.

Mr Calderone said this growth was the result of both strong domestic demand and exports. This sector of the market also represents a combination of the Italian and Mediterranean food traditions with modern innovations. Lower fat and reduced saturated fat content as well as a cut in salt levels in modern production are among the more recent developments mentioned by Mr Calderone, and ever higher levels of food safety are a constant focus for new research.

ASSICA data indicates that exports of Italian meat products exceeded 138,300 tons in 2012 - an increase of 3.7 per cent from the previous year - and reached a record value of €1.1 billion. Traditional hams made up 41 per cent of the total by volume and 51 per cent by value. Other top products by volume were mortadella (23 per cent), salami and sausages (18 per cent) and cooked ham (nine per cent).

Italy exports its pig meat products to other EU countries and across the globe.

Further growth in exports is held back by health concerns, according to Mr Calderone. The regions of Calabria and Campania are not recognised as free of Swine Vesicular Disease and African Swine Fever remains a concern in Sardinia. As a result, some third countries (outside the EU) put heavy restrictions on imports of pig meat products from all regions of Italy, particularly of fresh meat, offals and products with a short or medium maturation period. These limitations hold back Italian pig meat exports to the tune of €40 to €50 million annually, according to Mr Calderone, if those products accepted by EU member states were accepted by all countries.

Furthermore, EU countries imported fresh Italian pork and offal to a value of €4.5 billion in 2012, an increase of 12 per cent over the year before.

Another problematical issue cited by Mr Calderone is the low value achieved by less favoured parts of the carcass, much goes to the petfood market, and leads to an imbalance in the supply chain. Other EU countries, such as Denmark, achieve a better balance, he said. Overall, Mr Calderone and his association estimate that, considering all these aspects, Italy loses €250 million in pig meat exports annually. Breaking down these barriers would have considerable beneficial effects on the country's pig meat industry, he added.