

UK: Pig wasting syndrome costing farmers millions

Stark new figures show that a common pig virus, present on 99% of pig farms has major economic implications for individual farmers and the pig industry as a whole.



It is costing British farmers as much as £84 per pig (if the pig dies from the syndrome), and during epidemic periods, such as 2008, costing the pig industry £88M per year.

PMWS, a serious syndrome which results in emaciation and death in up to 30% of cases. As part of a BBSRC-led initiative into combating endemic diseases of farmed animals, researchers from the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) have spent the past five years working to understand the factors that lead to farms developing high rates of PMWS and creating models to work out the cost of the disease as well as the potential savings for farmers by tackling the disease in different ways.

Professor Dirk Werling, from RVC, who led the project, explains: "We've known for many years that this is a serious disease in pigs. It is now endemic globally and will haunt the pig industry for years to come; therefore it is crucial that we understand the biological basis of the virus as well as the cost implications. Knowing the financial impact of the illness can help farmers decide how best to improve the welfare and profitability of their herds. These figures are shocking, but are an important step in enabling farmers and the industry as a whole to look at feasible and sustainable intervention strategies."

Dr Pablo Alarcon, professor Jonathan Rushton and Dr Barbara Wieland, all from RVC, produced a series of mathematical models, factoring in different scenarios such as the size of the pig herds, the proportion affected by PMWS and the severity of the infection. In the most severe cases where the infected pig dies from PMWS, this costs the farmer an estimated £84, with the least severe case - where a pig is carrying the virus but displays no clinical symptoms - cost £8.

Models were then created to look at the cost implications of employing different control measures at individual farm level, ranging from vaccination of piglets through to total

repopulation of a farm's pig stocks. Their model suggests that on farms with moderate to high rates of PMWS the most cost effective strategy is to vaccinate all piglets and increase biosecurity measures, such as a two day quarantine period for people who had come into contact with other pig herds and treating pigs with PMWS in isolation. Savings from this dual approach were worked out to be between £2,947 to £11,500 per year.

BBSRC chief executive professor Douglas Kell said: "Food security and the sustainability of UK farming are seriously undermined by endemic diseases of farmed animals. This important new research shows the significant economic impact that diseases such as PMWS can cause, and highlights the vital role researchers play in working with farmers and industry to improve food security and animal welfare"

Professor Werling was one of ten projects which received funding as part of Combating Endemic Diseases of Farmed Animals for Sustainability (CEDFAS) initiative launched in 2007, with £11.5M funding from BBSRC, the Scottish Government and Defra. This modelling project was further supported by the BPEX division of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, Pfizer Animal Health, and BioBest Ltd.

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