

Feeding Garbage to Pigs: It's Just Not Worth the Risk

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Definitions

- Garbage: human food waste that contains or has had contact with meat, poultry, or fish, including waste from restaurants, school cafeterias, food processing plants, and homes.
- Scraps: excess, damaged, or expired bakery items, dairy products, eggs, fruits and vegetables, and other non-meat foodstuffs.

Background

The mission of the Washington State Department of Agriculture's Animal Health Program is to protect and enhance animal health and animal well-being, promote the economic vitality of the livestock industry by minimizing exposure to animal diseases, and safeguard the citizens of Washington State by identifying and limiting exposure to zoonotic diseases. Although it is currently legal to feed "garbage" to hogs in Washington if one obtains a license and follows regulations, the WSDA recommends the state legislature votes to discontinue this option. Garbage feeding is currently prohibited in 23 other states to minimize disease transmission and protect public health and the economic vitality of livestock industries there.

Disease Concerns

Several serious diseases can be transmitted through feeding raw or undercooked meat products to swine. African swine fever (ASF) and Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) are economically devastating and highly contagious viral diseases affecting domestic and wild pigs. Trichinosis can be transmitted to humans through undercooked pork and therefore poses a significant public health concern.

ASF and FMD are foreign animal diseases not yet existing in the U.S. According to USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service 2018 census data, Washington has 17,000 hogs that could be devastated by diseases like ASF and FMD. Although these diseases do not affect human health, the impact on U.S. livestock producers, their communities, and the economy would be significant if they entered the U.S. Currently, no treatment or vaccine is available for these deadly diseases. The only way to stop ASF and FMD is to depopulate and dispose of all affected or exposed herds.

FMD is also a threat to other livestock industries including cattle, sheep, and goats. Swine are considered viral amplifiers, able to spread diseases across species and potentially into wildlife populations. The establishment of these diseases in wildlife could make eradication efforts very difficult. Wild boar populations are implicated in sustained transmission of ASF, particularly in parts of the European Union; FMD can infect all cloven-hooved wildlife species.

Recently, ASF has been spreading in countries around the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, China, Mongolia, Vietnam and in parts of the European Union. Introduction of the ASF virus in these outbreaks has been linked to several factors: cured, raw, or undercooked pork products (imported and illegal) fed to swine; raw pork waste or garbage from international airports or shipping ports subsequently fed to swine; persistence and transmission of the ASF virus through tick vectors; and movement of infected domestic or wild pigs contacting domestic pigs.

USDA is working closely with other federal and state agencies, the swine industry, and producers to take the necessary actions to protect our nation's pigs and keep these diseases out of the U.S. These groups are also preparing to respond if ASF or FMD were ever detected in the U.S. Garbage feeding has been identified as a high-risk activity for the introduction of disease by USDA.

The Swine Health Protection Act

The USDA has oversight of the Swine Protection Act that allows conditional licensing for garbage feeding, but States have oversight and can use discretion about whether to allow the practice. Garbage feeding is deemed acceptable by the USDA if strict protocols (e.g., boiling for 30 min.) are followed and regularly monitored by State Animal Health Officials. However, there is unprecedented risk of foreign animal disease transmission with this practice if protocols are not followed strictly. ASF and FMD can survive for months in raw, undercooked, and cured meat products imported legally and illegally from other countries, posing a serious and ongoing threat.

Risks from Garbage Feeding

The practice of feeding garbage to swine was cited as the cause of the devastating 2001 FMD outbreak in the U.K. This outbreak cost the U.K. economy £6 billion in losses to the agriculture and tourism industries. Over 6 million cows and sheep were killed as part of the effort to control the disease, and at least 80 farmer suicides were documented as a direct result of the outbreak.

Risks from garbage feeding vastly outweigh any benefits of supplementing swine diets with garbage. Garbage feeding does not replace a complete, nutritionally balanced diet, but rather has been used by backyard swine producers to offset some costs of production. Swine producers can still feed scraps including fruit, vegetables, bread, and bakery waste that has not contacted meat or meat products. Due to knowledge of the risks, labor factors, and mechanized feeding of complete rations, garbage feeding is not conducted on commercial swine farming operations.

Summary

The entry of foreign animal diseases into the U.S. swine herd would be economically, environmentally, and sociologically devastating; and recrudescence of trichinosis would threaten human health. These negative outcomes would be minimized by prohibiting garbage feeding to swine.