

Why do German pig farmers perceive African Swine Fever (ASF) as a threat?



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Background

African Swine Fever (ASF), a fatal disease for domestic pigs and European wild boar, has been spreading throughout Europe in the past 14 years. After cases in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Belgium from 2014 to 2018, ASFV was also confirmed in wild boar in the East of Germany in September 2020 [1]. Outbreaks of ASF cause considerable and long-lasting economic damage in affected countries.

Between December 2019 and February 2021, a qualitative study involving face-to-face interviews with pig farmers in Lower Saxony was conducted to explore in how far they perceive ASF as a threat. As recent events have demonstrated, an individual's evaluation of a threat plays an important role in the willingness to participate in epidemic control measures.

Materials and Methods

Participants:

Pig farmers from Lower Saxony were invited to participate in the research project. Participants were assigned to four groups, according to production system: fattening farms, piglet producers, farrow-to-finish farms, and free-range farms. No new interviews were conducted when theoretical saturation in the interview topics was reached in each group. In total, 81 farmers were interviewed.

Interview design

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured open face-to-face interviews on the farms. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview transcripts were then coded thematically and analysed applying qualitative content analysis [2].



Figure 1: Free-range pig farms face an uncertain future as ASF continues spreading in Europe.

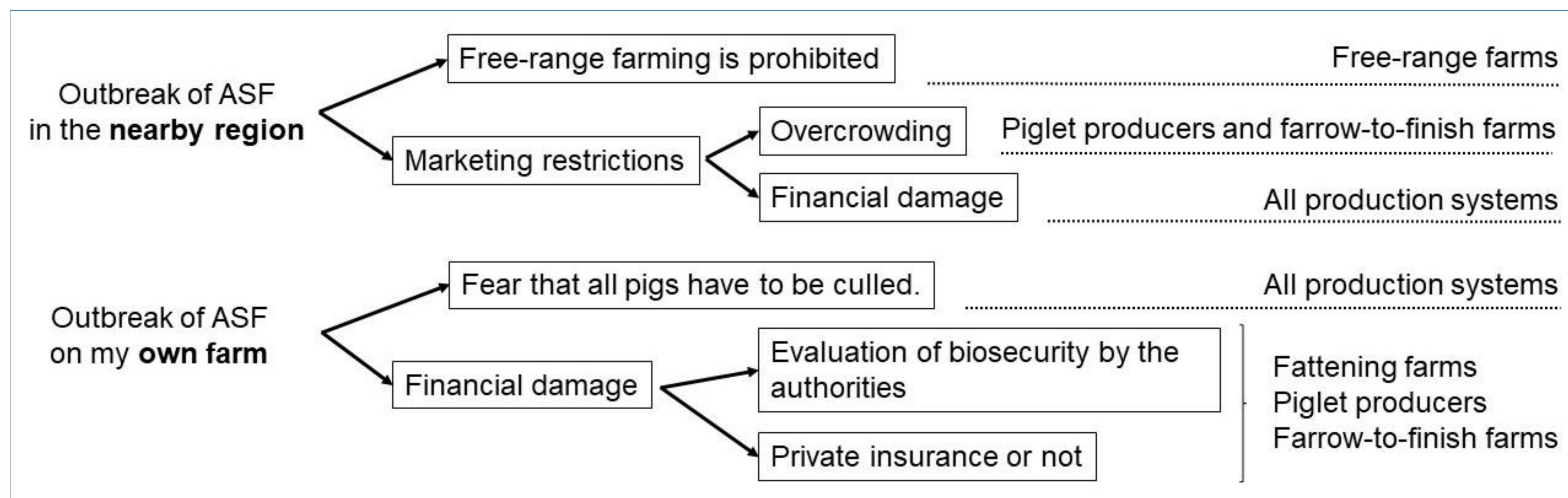


Figure 2: Farmers with different production systems evaluate the consequences, that they expect ASF to have on their farm, differently (here: exemplary results for reasons of space).

Examples of the assessment of threat scenarios by the farmers:

Many farmers worry about the emotional and financial consequences that the culling of all their pigs would have for them. However, many farmers perceive an outbreak of ASF in the nearby region as the „worst case scenario“.

- Many of the farmers with outdoor farming worry that the prohibition of free-range farming would mean the end for their farming business.
- Piglet producers and farmers with farrow-to-finish farms are apprehensive of local marketing restrictions because they fear overcrowding in the stalls if they do not have space for the new-born piglets.

References

[1] "Erster Fall Von Afrikanischer Schweinepest Bei Einem Wildschwein in Deutschland." <https://www.fli.de/de/aktuelles/kurznachrichten/>, Friedrich-Loeffler-Institute, Federal Institute for Animal Health, 2020, accessed September 11, 2020.

[2] Kuckartz, Udo. *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. 4 ed. Weinheim Basel: Beltz Juventa, 2018.

Discussion

In how far farmers perceive ASF as a threat highly depends on the production system.

The farmers' perception of ASF influences their willingness to implement preventive measures against ASF.

Acknowledging and comprehending the individual farming realities of different production systems is one precondition for constructive cooperation between authorities and farmers to establish successful epidemic control measures.