

Human-to-pig flu transfer in Canada

Reuters Last updated 16:11 03/05/2009

Canadian health officials say they found the new H1N1 flu virus in a swine herd in the province of Alberta but that there is no threat to the food supply.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency said the herd in the western Canadian province apparently caught the virus from a human who travelled recently to Mexico, the epicentre of a swine flu outbreak that has spread to 18 countries and may have killed more than 100 people, all but one in Mexico.

It was the first time the agency had reported a case of the virus being transmitted from a human to a pig in Canada.

The agency said the infected herd was quarantined pending more testing, "but that the chances the pigs could transfer the virus to humans was remote."

"The safety of the food supply is not affected and Canadian pork continues to be safe to eat," it added.

It said all the infected pigs had recovered or were recovering.

Canada has had more than 70 confirmed cases of the H1N1 virus in humans, all mild and involving recent travelers to Mexico or those who had contact with others who had been in the Latin American nation.

Canadian Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz said Canada was talking with its trading partners, adding that US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack had assured him Canada would continue to have access to the American market.

"We will continue to work with our American partners as we deal with this issue," Ritz said in a statement.

"The case identified in Alberta is entirely contained. There is no threat to human or animal health," Ritz said.

Vilsack downplayed the impact of the Canadian outbreak on the United States, noting there had been no reports of infections in US pigs and that pork and pork products were safe to eat.

"Canada has handled this situation appropriately and taken the necessary steps and precautions," Vilsack said in a statement later on Saturday. He said US officials would continue to monitor the situation.

But Canadian farmers expressed concerns that more of the country's trading partners might impose restrictions on pork.

The Philippines, El Salvador, Honduras and Ukraine have stopped accepting Canadian pork since the H1N1 scare. South Korea is not accepting live hogs.

"What's happened here is what we feared," Jurgen Preugschas, an Alberta hog farmer and president of the Canadian Pork Council, said when asked about the impact of the swine herd infection.

"Ultimately it shouldn't affect the industry long-term. It's all perception. The meat is safe. (But) it's going to be a lot of hype in the short term."

Flu viruses do not affect the safety of pork, according to the World Health Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, which warned on Saturday against imposing trade restrictions on pig or pig products.

The Philippines, El Salvador, Honduras and Ukraine already have stopped accepting Canadian pork since the H1N1 cases were identified in Canada, while South Korea is not accepting live hogs.

The World Health Organisation on Thursday changed the name of the strain from "swine flu" to A-H1N1 to reflect the fact the virus was spreading between humans and not in pigs. The Geneva-based agency was also under intense pressure from the pork industry, including Canadian farmers, to change the name.

Source: Reuters