NPA briefing note on feral wild boar

Issue:

In 2008, Defra published ‘Feral wild boar in England: An action plan’ in response to a consultation following an increasing number of requests for guidance on how to manage these animals. The action plan passed responsibility of the management of feral wild boar populations to the landowner. The number of feral wild boar has since increased, and efforts to control the population have been largely unsuccessful. This has been hampered by the lack of any real insight into the number of feral wild boar in each population or systematic mapping of population spread. Such un-controlled populations are not only damaging the environment that they are in, but also pose a significant disease threat to the British pig herd due to their increased interaction with the general public.

Background:

- In England, feral wild boar are present on the public forest estate in Kent and Sussex (Forestry Commission (FC) South East England) and in Gloucestershire and Herefordshire (FC Forest of Dean). There are suggestions that boar may also be present on the public forest estates in Devon (FC Peninsula) and Dorset (FC New Forest). Feral boar have also been seen in Wales and there are growing populations in Scotland (especially Lochaber and Dumfries/Galloway).

- The existing populations seen today all originated from farmed stock as the historical population of true wild boar was hunted to extinction some 300 years ago. As a result, the animals are of mixed genetic heritage, meaning they are capable of rapid population increases due to the early onset of sexual maturity, their ability to have larger litters and potential to breed more than once a year. They are also able to disperse widely and, with the exception of young piglets, have no natural predators.

- The largest population in England resides in the Forest of Dean within the public estate controlled by the Forestry Commission. The original population established in woodlands near Ross-on-Wye after escaping from a wild boar farm in the area during the 1990s. In 2004 a group of around 60 farm-reared animals were dumped in an illegal release near the village of Staunton on the western edge of the Forest, above the Wye Valley. By 2009 it was clear that the two populations had merged and a breeding population was thriving.

- The population has been tracked using an annual ‘distance sampling/thermal imaging survey’ since 2013. Since then, numbers are estimated to have increased from just over 500 in 2013, to 1,635 in 2018.

- There is little information relating to the other populations of feral wild boar as the numbers are not tracked or logged. However, we do know from local knowledge that these populations are increasing albeit at a slower rate to those in the Forest of Dean.

- The UK pig industry is concerned about the existence of these growing populations, primarily because they represent a real and significant disease risk to the national herd. African swine fever (ASF) is currently spreading rapidly through populations of wild boar in a number of European countries.
countries, and has recently spread into China, demonstrating the ability of this species to spread exotic notifiable disease.

- The spread of ASF in Europe is largely as a result of wild boar gaining access to and eating infected meat products discarded by humans or infected boar carcasses. Illegal swill feeding by smallholder operations has also played a significant role, whilst commercial farms have been largely unaffected. In China, where swill feeding is legal, many commercial farms have also been affected.

- As the feral wild boar in Britain are increasingly coming into contact with people, they are losing their natural fear of them and are starting to access picnic area bins and domestic bins in local villages and towns, thus increasing the risk that they will access contaminated meat. It is also the case that a small number of people have deliberately fed the boar, despite this being illegal.

- Evidence suggests that a population of more than 400 animals is thought to be capable of successfully circulating Classical Swine Fever \(^3\), and the same would apply to ASF. Should the disease enter the feral wild boar population, or any pig farm nearby, the whole area would be shut down within a feral boar control zone. Achieving “disease free” status would be very difficult as the country would need to prove that the disease had been completely eradicated and it would be near impossible to say with any certainty that all of the wild boar had been culled as part of the eradication measures.

- Disease free status is necessary for movement restrictions to be lifted and for exports of pigmeat to other countries such as China to resume. This market is currently worth around £470 million (2018).

- In addition to the disease risk, feral wild boar are also responsible for a considerable number of road traffic accidents (RTAs). In the Forest of Dean the number of RTAs has increased linearly with the population of wild boar and totalled 135 in 2017 in the Dean area alone \(^4\). In some areas this has resulted in fatalities \(^5\) or serious injury to humans and there have been recent reports of wild boar attacking livestock \(^6\) and people \(^7\).

- Defra’s approach to management of the feral wild boar population in England is detailed in an action plan produced in 2008. The plan asserts that free roaming wild boar are feral wild animals, and as such do not belong to anyone, stating “that primary responsibility for feral wild boar management lies with local communities and individual landowners. However, Government will help facilitate this regional management through provision of guidance and advice”. Unfortunately, the action plan stops short of requiring land owners to control them.

- A deer and wild boar management group was established several years ago to focus on wild boar in key areas such as the Forest of Dean and the Wye Valley. The group comprised the NFU, CLA, Woodland Trust, Wildlife Trust, Forestry Commission and the Deer Initiative. The committee agreed a culling regime in the Forest of Dean, which was approved by all stakeholders including the RSPCA and RSPB to reduce the number of wild boar to a ‘sustainable population’ of around 400 animals. However, despite this aspiration, further increases in the population have occurred.

- The Deer Initiative provides advice to Defra on managing wild boar populations and has produced some helpful guidelines both for keeping farmed wild boar in and feral wild boar out. They can be found here: [http://www.wild-boar.org.uk/guide_list/](http://www.wild-boar.org.uk/guide_list/)

- The keeping of wild boar is covered by the Dangerous Wild Animals Act (2007)\(^8\). Keepers must obtain a license to do so from their Local Authority and adhere to specific conditions such as minimum fencing requirements. There is however no centralised database of wild boar farms, nor is there any requirement for these animals to be identified to the holding, so when they escape or are released, there is no way of finding out where they have come from or any penalty for the responsible owner.
NPA position:

- The ever-expanding feral wild boar population in the Forest of Dean poses a significant threat to the health of commercial pigs and, in the event of a notifiable disease outbreak, risks the UK pig industry losing its export market—something that would be extremely difficult to regain.

- The number of feral wild boar in established populations in Britain (estimated at around 4,000 in total) and the threat of disease has increased considerably since the Defra 2008 action plan was published. As such, NPA would urge Defra to revise the action plan as soon as possible.

- A more coordinated and effective approach to management of wild boar populations is urgently required. NPA believes it is vital that Defra supports population management through culling in the revised action plan and takes an active role in helping to shape a UK strategy for feral wild boar with all relevant parties.

- NPA also urges Defra to review the Dangerous Wild Animals Act to include wild boar crosses and properly defined criteria for a licence, such as fencing requirements. In addition, there should be a central record of the number and location of farmed wild boar and a requirement to tag individuals so they can be identified to the holding they are kept on.

- The public is urged to help the Deer Initiative track new sightings of feral wild boar by entering any information here: http://www.wild-boar.org.uk/report_a_sighting/

References


[2] https://www.forestryengland.uk/article/more-information-about-wild-boar


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