

# Swine threat



DAILY NEWS / ERICA HOBBS

Recent discoveries of the pseudorabies virus (PRV) in transitional swine have threatened Michigan's \$230 million pork industry. State officials worry that feral pigs could spread the virus to commercial swine, like these pigs seen Monday at G&W Farms in Pittsford, and is taking aggressive action against them, including encouraging deer hunters to shoot feral swine if they encounter them.

## Wild boars pose danger to local domestic swine, plants, people

By Erica Hobbs

DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

The sightings of feral swine in Michigan, including Pittsford, has brought to light the threat these animals pose to local pigs, plants and humans.

The threat is real say state officials who have issued warnings about a virus the feral pigs carry which could devastate domestic herds and about the critters' aggressiveness, which pose dangers to humans they come in contact with.

Feral pigs or "wild boars" have been a perennial problem for many counties in Michigan, but recent discoveries of a dangerous virus in feral pigs threatens the state's \$230 million pork industry.

The Michigan Department of Agriculture said recently that

pseudorabies, also known as Aujeszky's disease or PRV, has been found in transitional swine at several facilities around the state.

The virus causes respiratory disease, reproductive problems, and even death in swine and other animals.

"(The pigs) will have smaller litters or still births," state veterinarian Dr. Steven Halstead said, "and it can cause respiratory disease in adult pigs, which affects their growth and their productivity."

PRV can affect cattle, horses, dogs, cats, sheep and goats and is extremely contagious, transmitting easily through nasal and oral secretions and living for up to two days in soil and feces.

The virus had been eradicated in the state in 2000.

"We know from these national

PRV efforts (from before 2000) just how much we were suffering," Halstead said. "The productivity of pig farms has gone up considerably since it was eradicated."

A mixture between commercial swine bred as livestock and feral "wild boars," transitional swine are pigs used for sport shooting on fenced-in game ranches, according to the Agriculture Department, and currently does not affect the state's PRV-free status. However, the potential for the transitional swine to come into contact with other pigs in the state is cause for concern.

Though PRV cannot infect humans, feral swine are still a threat to humans.

Kristine Brown, a laboratory technician for the Michigan Department

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of Natural Resources, said the pigs have been sighted weighing up to 350 pounds and can attack people.

"Pigs can be aggressive and we have numerous reports of charging," she said. "One person was even chased into their garage."

Halstead agreed, saying the swine are often territorial and protective of their offspring.

"They can have tusks, so they can have a weapon on the front," he said, "and they have been known to display outright aggression toward people."

In addition to threatening humans, wild pigs are destructive to the wildlife.

"Feral swine are not native to North America, so they are very destructive to the environment and to the habitat," Halstead said. "They eat natural resources that are useful to wild animals that rely on the various roots and grubs to survive. They cause siltation in the waterways. They also will destroy plants, farmland and crops."

The DNR and Ag are taking aggressive action against feral swine in an attempt to eradicate PRV and protect people and wildlife, and are encouraging hunters to shoot them if they encounter one.

"We're depopulating the four confirmed facilities that had PRV infections," Halstead said, "and we're testing all of the pigs within a five-mile radius of those confirmed ranches or farms."

## What do feral swine look like?

■ "Any pig loose in the state is considered feral," State Veterinarian Dr. Steven Halstead said. "It could be a commercial "bacon" pig that's gotten loose or a more exotic one that is like a razorback with big tusks."

■ "It doesn't matter if it's domestic or Eurasian, all pigs can breed with each other and have dark, coarse hair," Kristine Brown said, a laboratory technician for DNR. "Domestic pigs, once in the wild, will grow black coarse hair and tusks." For more information contact the MDA at (517) 373-1104.

The state is also requiring that all pigs that come into a show or exhibition have a negative PRV test within 45 days of the show, unless entered at a terminal fair where all pigs are slaughtered at the end.

Insa Raymond, the youth agent for the Michigan State University extension in Hillsdale County, said that 4-H participants in this year's fair will not be affected by the PRV scare.

"It doesn't affect 4-H in Hillsdale County, because we have a terminal sale in place," she said. "That is a requirement: either all hogs need to be PRV tested or it has to be a terminal sale. Youth just have to make sure that the hogs are healthy and well-fed and they do good sanitational practices."

The Hillsdale County Fair, however, has decided to eliminate both the open and barnyard animal divisions of the swine exhibition, which are not

## Three categories of swine in Michigan:

**Commercial Swine:** Domesticated pigs raised for the purposes of meat and consumption.

**Transitional Swine:** Razorback, Russian or Eurasian "wild boar" swine that are often crossbred with commercial swine for shooting on large, fenced game ranches.

**Feral Swine:** Any pig free-ranging outside an enclosure.

*Only commercial swine that have been infected with PRV affect the state's PRV-free status.*

terminal. The youth division, the largest of the three, will be a terminal fair.

"Fairs need to take a position this year, either they're terminal or not," fair general manager Scott Dow said. "It costs the exhibitors to have their animals. (PRV testing) is an expense that they don't really need to observe this year."

In addition to the fair regulations, both the DNR and MDA are advising and encouraging licensed deer hunters to kill the feral pigs, if they encounter one.

"Anyone who sees a pig outside of a fence is encouraged to shoot it," Halstead said, "As long as they have a valid (hunting) license and the pig doesn't have an eartag on it."

Those who are interested in shooting the feral swine must have at least a license to hunt small game.

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