# Protecting DA’s ambitious program

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With the local hog population estimated to be just 60 percent of what it was before the first case of the highly contagious African swine fever (ASF) was reported in 2019, the Department of Agriculture (DA’s) P1-billion swine repopulation program is a welcome development that must be given every chance to succeed.

Under this program announced last week by the DA, 30,000 gilts or female pigs that have yet to produce piglets will be distributed to large farms, which will in turn “repay the government by providing reared pigs for distribution to backyard farmers.”

The ambitious repopulation program is part of the DA’s goal to increase the local hog population by 2 million hogs every year from 2026 to 2028 to go back to the pre-2019 levels and thus reduce reliance on imported pork products.

This is on top of a separate DA initiative to develop vaccines through the newly inaugurated vaccine unit at the Center for Transboundary Animal Diseases in Nueva Ecija, which is dedicated to the rapid development of shots to protect animals against infectious diseases, from ASF to foot-and-mouth disease and avian influenza.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. pointed out that while there are ASF vaccines available abroad, vaccines that are developed here based on local conditions and indigenous strains should be more effective in preventing devastating outbreaks.

## Massive supply crunch

These programs geared toward solving the lingering ASF problem are certainly laudable.

Unfortunately, it will take some time for these big-ticket programs to yield the desired results, not least of which is to help restore the local hog inventory to the 14 million heads recorded before ASF infected piggeries all over the country and slashed local population by 6 million heads.

This decimation of huge hog populations then led to a massive supply crunch that drove up the market prices of pork, compromised food security, and devastated the livelihood of backyard farmers who rely on their animals for their livelihood.

According to the Pork Producers Federation of the Philippines, the ASF outbreak has already caused P200 billion in losses to the hog industry and still counting.

Given the gravity of what is at stake, the country cannot just sit back and wait for the benefits of these programs to start being felt.

Instead, the national government as well as local government units should fill the gap not just by relying on imported pork products to stabilize supply and prices but by doubling down on the strict and consistent enforcement of control measures to prevent the spread the ASF.

## ‘Pork holiday’

Just last week, Borongan City in Eastern Samar declared a state of calamity because of the growing number of cases of ASF in different barangays, thus adding to the growing list of hot spots where ASF continues to wreak havoc.

And this occurred right after the city lifted the 15-day “pork holiday” precisely to keep ASF under control by regulating the slaughter, movement, and sale of pork products, which goes to show just how easily cases can immediately flare up and pose severe risks to vulnerable hog populations.

“ASF in the region keeps coming back,” lamented Vincie Pantonino, a senior veterinarian at the DA regional regulatory division on the recent flare-up of cases in several provinces. “We can clear an area, but if neighboring local government are not cleared [of the disease] and complacent, that’s the number one reason the disease spreads.”

According to the latest report of the Bureau of Animal Industry, there are active ASF cases in eight provinces and five regions as of April 11, from Benguet in the north to Bohol in the Visayas to Surigao del Sur in Mindanao.

## Contagious and infectious

Government agencies and LGU officials cannot afford to let down their guard. It cannot be overemphasized that ASF is a highly contagious and infectious disease that can easily decimate entire hog populations as had already been seen over the past few years.

Those entrusted to enforce the law should therefore faithfully enforce measures that have already proven effective.

These include restricting the movement of pigs from provinces where there are confirmed cases of ASF, immediate culling of infected animals, and rigorous disease surveillance to contain cases in as small a zone as possible, strict implementation of biosafety standards by both backyard farmers and large corporate piggeries, and adherence to quarantine protocols.

Enforcement of these protocols to protect the current population will give enough time for repopulation efforts to take root and other longer-term projects to protect both the hog populations and supported affected farmers come to fruition.

Only through close cooperation and collaboration between stakeholders, from the government agencies to the research institutions to the communities themselves can ASF be dealt with decisively to protect the billions in investment and the livelihood of countless poultry farmers.