



Canadian Food
Inspection Agency

Agence canadienne
d'inspection des aliments

Public opinion research with small-scale producers to support communications on African swine fever

Executive Summary

Prepared for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency

Supplier name: Earnscliffe Strategy Group
Contract number: 39903-210590/001/CY
Contract value: \$129,699.47 (including HST)
Award date: December 4, 2020
Delivery date: March 26, 2021

Registration number: POR-069-20

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Canada 

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March 2021

This public opinion research report presents the results of the focus groups, telephone and online survey conducted by Earnscliffe Strategy Group on behalf of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. The research was conducted from January to March 2021.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Recherche sur l'opinion publique auprès de petits producteurs pour appuyer les communications sur la peste porcine africaine

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1400 Merivale Road
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Catalogue Number: A104-206/2021E-PDF

International Standard Book Number (ISBN): 978-0-660-38837-3

Related publications (registration number): POR-069-20

A104-206/2021F-PDF (Final Report, French)
978-0-660-38838-0

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Executive summary

Purpose and objectives

Earnscliffe Strategy Group (Earnscliffe) is pleased to present this report to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) on the findings of the research with small-scale pork producers and pig owners to help inform future communications on African swine fever (ASF).

ASF poses a significant risk to the health of the Canadian swine herd, pork industry and the Canadian economy. This viral disease, while it only poses a threat to pigs, is highly contagious and can spread rapidly through both direct and indirect contact with infected pigs or pig products, and farm equipment. In an effort to mitigate the risks of ASF in Canada, the CFIA National Emergency Operations Centre for ASF examined risk pathways for how the disease could possibly enter Canada. The centre identified farmers with insufficient on-farm biosecurity practices and those that may possibly feed pork or pork products to pigs as a possible entry point.

To reduce the risk of ASF in Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) intends to communicate with small scale pork producers and hobby farmers to inform them of the risk of ASF and to protect Canada's pigs by encouraging stronger on-farm biosecurity practices. The CFIA required research to inform its efforts to strengthen biosecurity practices and safeguard the Canadian pork industry. The research will be used to help inform future communications with small-scale pork producers and pig owners on ASF and other similar issues.

The specific research objectives of this study were to:

- gain a better understanding of small-scale farmers' level of awareness of ASF and what measures are in place on their farms to mitigate the risk of ASF;
- discover what resources may be needed and barriers for sound biosecurity practices;
- uncover how they stay informed on animal health issues (such as ASF) that could impact their farms and what sources of information they rely on (for example, associations, newsletters, publications, forums, etc.); and,
- gather feedback on how to best communicate with them on ASF and other potential foreign animal diseases and animal health issues.

The total contract value of this research is \$129,699.47, including HST.

Methodology

To achieve these objectives, Earnscliffe conducted a 2 part research program. The research program began with a dual-mode survey of:

- small-scale pork producers who do not belong to a national or provincial pork producer association; and,
- pig owners who do not have a registered farm business and do not belong to a national or provincial pork producer association.

A total of 355 small-scale pork producers (56) and pig owners without a registered farm business (299) were surveyed. The survey was conducted in collaboration with our quantitative sub-contractor, Leger. Small-scale pork producers were surveyed by telephone from Leger's virtual call-centre using their state-of-the-art Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. Leger drew the sample from the Dun & Bradstreet list of registered farm businesses. Pig owners without a registered farm business were surveyed online using Leger's proprietary panel. The telephone interviews were conducted between January 29 and March 2, 2021 and the average interview length was 25 minutes. The online interviews were conducted between February 8 and March 8, 2021 and the

average interview length was 9 minutes. Due to the lack of information about the size and profile of the universes sampled, the data was not weighted.

The second phase was qualitative and involved a series of 20 interviews with small-scale pork producers who do not belong to national or provincial pork producer associations. 15 of the interviews were conducted in English and 5 were conducted in French. 13 of the interviews were conducted by phone and 7 were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length. Participants were recruited using the Dun & Bradstreet list of registered farm businesses. The interviews took place between February 16 and March 4, 2021.

It is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy, and public opinion research. This type of research is not designed to help reach a consensus or to make decisions, but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.

Key findings

- Awareness of ASF is not universal but is higher among farmers (61%) than among non-farmers (30%). Few participants in the qualitative research could provide details about ASF, indicating that deep understanding of the disease and what it could entail is not widespread.
- Concern about ASF exists, but few feel particularly concerned. Just 4% of farmers and 14% of non-farmers feel it poses a high risk to their pigs.
 - Half (50%) of farmers say they know how to prevent the spread of ASF to their pigs. A third (35%) of non-farmers agree.
 - Several participants in the qualitative research explained that ASF is not a concern for them because they do not think it is in Canada, and even if it were to enter Canada, they feel that it would be properly contained by the authorities and have faith in their own biosecurity measures to prevent the spread of disease.
 - The survey gauged respondents' confidence in government regulators' ability to quickly contain an outbreak and discovered that almost half (46%) offered low levels of confidence. While this result appears to contradict the qualitative finding above, the low level of concern farmers indicated in the qualitative research may stem from the assumption that this would be something they would primarily contain on their own. Fully 70% of farmers surveyed indicate feeling ASF poses little or no risk to their pigs, 86% of farmers said they would be contacting a veterinarian if their pigs showed symptoms of illness and only 25% disagreed with the statement that they know all of the best practices for containing ASF. Alternatively, the difference may be in the interpretation of the word "quickly". Encouragingly, those who are very concerned about pig diseases are also more confident in government regulators' ability to control the spread.
- More than three-quarters (79%) of farmers and 60% of non-farmers say that they have measures in place to prevent the spread of disease.
 - Notably, fewer non-farmers undertake many of the measures investigated in the quantitative survey compared to farmers. They also are more likely to let their pigs interact with other animals and visitors.
 - The qualitative research suggests that there is likely a broad spectrum of biosecurity measures. Many mentioned vaccinating their pigs. A few indicated that they limit outside interaction with their pigs and ensure all those who come into contact with them have clean clothes, sanitize

properly, etc. Some are particular about the kind of feed they use, but the kind of feed they view as the healthiest varies.

- Both phases of research demonstrate that there is no universal approach to efficiently communicate with these pig owners as they have widely varying sources of information – both informal and formal – on pig care.
- Veterinarians emerge, in both the quantitative and qualitative research, as trusted sources of information. While less than half of those surveyed sought veterinary care for their pigs in the past year (39% of farmers and 41% of non-farmers), the qualitative research suggests that even those who do not regularly seek care from veterinarians trust them and would not hesitate to reach out to one if they felt it was necessary.
- Informal communication channels between farmers also seem important. Half (54%) of farmers and a quarter of non-farmers (24%) rely on them. Interviewees indicated that these sorts of informal networks could include text or WhatsApp chains, direct conversations with local farmers or their feed supplier.
- The internet, including social media, specific websites and provincial government websites, are other information sources that these audiences rely on.
- Pork councils, boards and industry associations are a source that some use, but participants in the qualitative research noted 2 reasons why they pay less attention to them and likely won't join as members:
 - Some disagree with the idea of raising pigs for slaughter.
 - Others do not see the value in a membership. Some noted they get all the information they need from these sources for free and do not need the benefit of their marketing or advocacy efforts, as they don't sell their pork commercially.
- When asked how they would like to receive information from government about caring for their pigs, respondents most often mention email (39% of farmers and 29% of non-farmers), direct conversations with CFIA representatives (29% of farmers and 24% of non-farmers), or a dedicated website (29% of farmers and 36% of non-farmers).
 - Almost a third (29%) of farmers also noted that they would appreciate traditional newsletters. Several participants in the qualitative mentioned that they prefer paper communication as well.

Research firm

Earnscliffe Strategy Group Inc. (Earnscliffe)

Contract number: 39903-210590/001/CY

Contract award date: December 4, 2020

I hereby certify as a Representative of Earnscliffe Strategy Group that the final deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed:

Date: March 26, 2021

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Doug Anderson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Doug Anderson
Principal, Earnscliffe