Processed meat products test positive for ASF

MANILA, Philippines – Various processed meat products have tested positive for African swine fever (ASF) just as the government ordered the lifting of the ban on the transport and entry of such commodities to the Visayas and Mindanao.

In a clinical laboratory report dated Oct. 15, the Bureau of Animal Industry confirmed that three meat samples have been detected with the ASF viral DNA using the real time polymerase chain reaction test.

The products were hotdog, longganisa and tocino. The report, however, did not show a specific brand or where they came from.

Agriculture group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (Sinag) claimed that the products are most likely imported, maintaining that processed meat products are never actually tested for ASF.

“This only proves that we should not trust the claims of processors that the ASF virus can actually be killed once it undergoes heat treatment,” Sinag said.

Earlier this week, the Department of the Interior and Local Government ordered the movement, distribution and sale of processed meat products despite local government units (LGUs)’s imposition of a ban as a precautionary measure against ASF.

This came after the Philippine Association of Meat Processors Inc. (PAMPI) warned of more than P50-billion losses in sales as its members continue to face difficulties in transporting and entering several provinces, especially with the Christmas season just around the corner.

PAMPI, on the other hand, expressed concern over the report, saying it may have been orchestrated to make the industry look worse.

“All our processes, we have respected the rules. Anyone could taint the samples,” PAMPI spokesman Rex Agarrado said in a phone interview. “And if they wanted the results out, they would not wait for another week before they release that. We are just concerned on their timing.”

Because of the latest incident, Sinag wrote letters to Agriculture Secretary William Dar, Health Secretary Francisco Duque III and Customs Commissioner Leonardo Guerrero calling for the implementation of the Quarantine First Policy.

“With the current ASF pandemic, it is high time that the provision of the law be realized and fulfilled. Pork and pork-based products have never been subjected to any ASF testing at the first port of entry,” Sinag said.
The Food Safety Act of 2013 paved the way for the country to align its national sanitary and phytosanitary border measures and control to the global standard of quarantine first policy.

This means that imported food shall undergo cargo inspection and clearance procedures by the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Department of Health (DOH) at the first port of entry to determine compliance with national regulations.

“All containers with pork and pork-based imports and pork byproducts should be examined and checked 100 percent at the port of first entry,” Sinag said.

If the provision of quarantine first policy cannot be implemented at this time, the group urged the DA and DOH-Food and Drug Administration to stop issuing sanitary and phytosanitary import clearance for the importation of pork and pork-based products.

It added that importations should only be allowed once it can be established that ASF virus testing for all pork and pork-based imports can be undertaken at the port of first entry.

“We will not hesitate to file appropriate charges with the ombudsman and other appropriate courts against those that have been remiss in ensuring the full implementation of the quarantine first policy,” Sinag said.

The DA has confirmed that Rizal, Bulacan, Pampanga, Pangasinan, Quezon City, Cavite and Nueva Ecija have cases of ASF. The DA has so far killed 62,000 hogs since the outbreak started in August.