‘Grown men in tears’: Hundreds of pigs culled with farms overcrowded amid butcher shortage

Hundreds of healthy pigs have been culled after a nationwide shortage of abattoir workers left farms overcrowded with animals that could not be sent for slaughter.

The National Pig Association (NPA) said at least 600 swine had been killed – and fears that the bottleneck in the meat processing industry could see as many as 150,000 affected.

NPA chief executive Zoe Davies told Sky News she had spoken to “grown men in tears” at the thought of having to carry out the cull – which she has been warning about for weeks.

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Labour shortage squeezes food supply chain

“These are animals that they have reared, fed, looked after, cared for,” she said.

“To actually then kill something that’s perfectly healthy to then go in the bin – it’s just criminal.”

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The crisis has been blamed on an exodus of eastern European workers, many of whom went back to their home countries after COVID-19 travel restrictions were eased but have not returned.

That has meant the abattoirs where they worked are operating at as much as 20% below capacity – unable to take as many pigs as normal – leaving farms overcrowded.

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It leaves farmers with the stark prospect of having to kill pigs which have been bred to eat and dump their carcasses.

Ms Davies said there was little sign of the picture improving with abattoirs still struggling to recruit butchers despite average wages of £37,500 for the job.

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Warning from pig farmers over Christmas

Temporary visas that are being issued to workers in the poultry and haulage sectors to head off shortages in those industries have not been offered for pig processing.

But Ms Davies, who **first warned of the issue in August**, said that even then they would need to be for longer than three months to attract the workers needed.

She described the despair being felt by farmers as worse than that experienced during previous disease outbreaks when large numbers of animals had to be killed – as there was no end in sight to the current impasse.

The shortage of food processing workers is just one element of a labour shortage taking its toll across the economy, with a shortage of 100,000 HGV drivers also causing havoc – most recently setting off a spate of panic buying at petrol stations.

Empty supermarket shelves and a lack of products at chains from Greggs to Nando’s are among the symptoms of the wider crisis.