

FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE – A UKIP BRIEFING (10.08.07)

By Jeffrey Titford MEP

The return of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), in the form of a, so far, limited outbreak in Surrey is another serious setback for Britain's farming industry. The outbreak is thought to have been caused by a bio-security lapse at a laboratory at Pirbright, where a vaccine for FMD is being developed. The site is shared by Merial Animal Health, the owners of the laboratory and the Government funded Institute for Animal Health, which holds some 5,000 strains of the virus.

The virus found in the cattle in Surrey has been confirmed as the same strain that was used in a batch of vaccines made in July and was not one that would normally infect animals. Questions are rightly being raised about how it is that an organisation that is supposed to be instrumental in fighting the disease may have been responsible for starting a new outbreak. Naturally, the laboratory is adamant that its bio-security has not been compromised.

A much more interesting question is why a vaccine is being developed at the Government's request, when its own scientific advisors prefer the zero tolerance method of slaughter and disposal for dealing with FMD in this country. Do the Government and its advisors know something we don't and has it been expecting a major outbreak?

The Government appears to be getting an easy ride so far because of the slightly misleading impression that DEFRA acted swiftly in sealing off the area around the infected farm and banning cattle movements. Closer inspection reveals a much more confused picture. DEFRA was first advised late on Thursday 2nd August but, amazingly, decided not to inspect the animals until the following morning because it was 'too dark'! Surely, it can't have been beyond the resources of a major Government department to organise some outside lighting? Astonishingly, footpaths in Surrey remained open until days after confirmation of the outbreak. In addition, farmers within a few miles of the outbreak were not officially contacted by DEFRA for five days.

Since confirmation of the outbreak, there have been a number of clarion calls for vaccination to prevent the possible spread of FMD, including the Liberal Democrats and our own Robin Page. Unfortunately, it is rather a knee-jerk reaction which needed more thought because it really isn't that simple. People need to understand the full implications of vaccinating cattle, not least the fact that meat and milk from vaccinated animals may carry the virus and spread it.

In 2001, a number of major players in the food chain, including Nestle, said they would not purchase products from vaccinated livestock for exactly that reason. This generated a domino effect which resulted in the then NFU President, Ben Gill's description of vaccinated cattle as "the walking dead". It is clear that vaccinating cattle can potentially turn them into very expensive pets and spell financial ruin for

farmers. There has to be a fundamental change of attitude from politicians, the wholesale and retail food industry and the general public before vaccination can be viable.

However, if Britain chooses the vaccination route, it should be understood that it would require every single cloven hoofed animal intended for the food chain to be vaccinated against FMD. Britain would also have to insist that it could only accept meat imports if the countries concerned have also undertaken a similar vaccination regime. The key issue here is that we cannot take such unilateral action, even if it is in our own best interests, because of our membership of the European Union, which would almost certainly not allow it.

Vaccination is by no means a perfect solution because vaccinated animals can be carriers of the disease without showing any symptoms. In effect, to introduce an all-animals-must-be-vaccinated policy means accepting a status similar to a third world country and that we would never be entirely clear of FMD. We would have to decide if this were a price worth paying, given the disaster in 2001.

The main method for tackling FMD in Britain is eradication - slaughter and disposal of infected animals. The best way to do this is to slaughter the animals on the farm and bury them in quicklime, there and then, which was the tried and tested traditional method. Once in the soil, the virus can't spread. Again, the EU has stepped in to prevent this. It only allows slaughter and disposal at approved sites, which involves transporting infected animals for many miles, dramatically increasing the risk of spreading the disease, which makes no sense at all.

By any test, the eradication policy was not a success in 2001, with more than 6 million animals being destroyed, many of which were probably perfectly healthy. There were far too many dead cattle for the normal disposal systems to cope with so we ended up with those massive funeral pyres, which, despite their Dantean appearance, could never be hot enough to guarantee total destruction of the virus. Therefore, we were sending millions of particles up into the atmosphere to potentially spread the disease even more widely.

POLICY

Even if the Surrey outbreak is successfully contained, UKIP should be calling for a public enquiry into what has been going on at the Pirbright laboratory. This is particularly necessary given the latest revelation about Legionnaire's Disease being found at the laboratory as well. We should also be campaigning for a full scale enquiry into bio-security at any establishment that is holding quantities of FMD virus in the UK. The enquiry should examine the locations of all such establishments with particular attention given to their proximity to agricultural land. It is not exactly rocket science to ensure that such laboratories are built as far from grazing farm animals as is practical.

Questions need to be asked about why DEFRA was slow to react to news of the possible outbreak, a potentially crucial few hours was lost. The upshot is that the livestock movement ban and the quarantine were not introduced until the Friday morning after the discovery of the sick cattle. The delay has serious implications such as the fact that an annual sheep fair in Thame, Oxfordshire went ahead on that day, involving some 20,800 sheep from all over the south-east of England.

Could some of these animals have come from the area around Pirbright? Had DEFRA introduced the cattle-movement ban on the Thursday night, the sheep fair would not have taken place. The sheep at the fair were auctioned and have presumably disappeared off to all parts of the country. This was completely unnecessary and could have been avoided had more decisive action been taken. UKIP should not shrink from pointing this out.

UKIP should be a strong advocate of vaccination as a long term solution to FMD but it should guard against promoting it as an instant solution, for the reasons previously stated. Vaccination is counter-productive if it renders the livestock unsaleable both domestically and internationally.

Part of the long term solution is the need for much greater investment into the science of FMD vaccination. UKIP should be advocates for more money for this research. Vaccination is an evolving science and in time scientists may be confident in its ability to stamp out FMD. Greater investment would certainly speed up this process. However, at the present time, the scientists who advise the Government still prefer the zero tolerance method.

We should also make it very clear that Britain is not fully in control of policy on FMD, far from it. We have no power to act unilaterally and have to go cap in hand to Brussels to ask for permission for any major policy change. We will never be fully in control of the situation until we prise ourselves free of the dead hand of Brussels and govern our own country again.

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