

Foot and mouth disease spreads throughout Europe

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The outbreak of foot and mouth disease on British farms threatens to unleash a new crisis in European agriculture. The disease, which mainly affects pigs, sheep and cattle, is highly contagious, being spread by contact or even on the wind. The virus does not usually infect humans, but can be passed on by people who have had contact with infected animals.

So far 24 farms or abattoirs have been infected in England and Wales. A suspected case is also being investigated in Northern Ireland. The government has imposed a nationwide ban on the movement of all livestock and all sites of infection are subject to stringent access controls.

Under present regulations, once an animal is diagnosed with the disease the entire herd is slaughtered to prevent transmission of the virus. Massive pyres have already been lit on several of the affected farms to burn the slaughtered animals. Present estimates are that at least 11,000 animals have already been destroyed, and the final toll could go as high as 25,000 according to some reports.

The disease is thought to have first appeared at Burnside Farm in Heddon-on-the-Wall, Northumberland last week. Animal welfare organisations had raised concerns about the squalid conditions at the farm in December last year, which vets described as the “perfect breeding ground” for the disease. It was also visited several times by Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) officials, who merely issued a warning.

Vets say the disease will have been incubating for at least 14 days before hand, increasing the likelihood that it has been passed on to other herds when animals from Burnside Farm were taken to market or to be slaughtered. The farmer, Robert Waugh, claims he “hadn't seen anything wrong with any of my pigs in the last few weeks.”

From Northumberland, the disease spread via the Cheal Meats Abattoir in Essex, where up to 600 farms send their

animals to be slaughtered.

The closure of many smaller local abattoirs means that livestock must now travel greater distances to the large slaughterhouses. This brings them into contact with a greater number of animals, and provides an ideal route for diseases such as foot and mouth. In the last 10 years the number of abattoirs fell from over 1,000 to just 340, with many of the closures justified on health grounds. However, a major factor was the need to reduce the cost of slaughter to make British meat competitive through the economies of scale possible when abattoirs are run on industrial lines.

The last occurrence of the disease in the UK was in 1981, when 200 cattle and 369 pigs were destroyed. However, in 1967 a major epidemic resulted in 2,364 outbreaks and 442,000 animals were destroyed at an overall cost of £177 million. A small outbreak was recorded in Greece in 1992, but the disease is endemic in many parts of the world, including South America, Africa and Asia.

Some experts are critical of the mass slaughter policy for foot and mouth disease. Abigail Woods, a vet researching the history of the disease at Manchester University, says it has more to do with economics than either animal welfare or public health. “The government's justification for slaughter... is based solely on the fact that recovered animals show a decline in meat and milk productivity.”

Although vaccines are available for foot and mouth, “Disease freedom is a precondition of international trade, and this could not be obtained through disease treatment or vaccination,” Woods said.

One of the farms at the centre of the outbreak in the UK is Burdon Farm in Devon, owned by Willie Cleave. It lies just four miles from Hatherleigh, which has one of the largest livestock markets and abattoirs in the country. Cleave, who owns 12 other farms, exports many animals

to Europe. "I deal in thousands of sheep and I farm my own suckler herd of cattle," he said.

Sales of British sheep and pigs to the continent—850,000 animals were exported to Europe last year—have raised fears that the disease may spread there. The European Union (EU) has imposed a ban on all meat imports from the UK and several governments have enforced quarantines on farms that have imported British animals, as well as ordering the slaughter of suspect herds.

* The Irish republic has closed its border with Northern Ireland to all animal movements and cattle markets in the border region are suspended.

* In Holland, 4,300 animals have been slaughtered on 18 farms linked to the UK trade. All markets have been banned.

* Angry farmers clashed with police outside EU headquarters in the Belgian capital Brussels earlier this week. Over 1,000 farmers on their tractors blockaded a meeting of EU agricultural ministers.

* In France, 20,000 sheep imported from Britain since the beginning of February are to be slaughtered. French and Belgian farmers participated in demonstrations, including blocking a number of border crossings.

* In Germany, the slaughter of suspect animals in North Rhine Westphalia has started, farms have been quarantined and tests begun on all UK farm imports. An exclusion zone was established round a farm near Dusseldorf, when sheep imported from the UK were found to have antibodies from the disease in their blood, indicating they had been in contact with infected animals. State Environment Minister Barbara Hoehn said, "we cannot rule out the outbreak of the disease on the continent."

An epidemic of foot and mouth disease could devastate European agriculture, which is already reeling from the spread of BSE/Mad Cow Disease from Britain. Although the number of BSE cases on the continent is still relatively small, the incidence of the disease has had a dramatic effect on beef consumption and prices, which have sunk by 35 percent in Germany and by 25 percent across the EU as a whole.

A scheme proposed by EU Agriculture Commissioner Franz Fischler to cull older cattle to try and keep beef prices stable met stiff opposition from a number of countries, since 30 percent of the finance needed to implement it would have to come from national coffers. Germany's Consumer Minister Renate Kuenast said it would "take millions from the national agriculture budget". While Britain, France and Spain, were among

those countries supporting Fischler's proposal, Italy, Holland, Finland and Denmark sided with Germany.

Like BSE, the threat posed by foot and mouth disease is exacerbated by the global domination of agriculture and food production by transnational agribusiness. The real beneficiaries of the so-called "cheap food" policy in the West are the corporate interests controlling the industry. Throughout the richest countries belonging to the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), the vast sums paid to agribusiness amount to \$362bn a year, 20 times more than all the rest of the world combined.

This has enabled a few major corporations to gain a near monopoly position in several areas of agriculture. According to David Korten, a US author and campaigner for sustainable development, "one company, Cargill's, controls 80 percent of world grain supplies, five companies account for 65 percent of the global pesticide market, and another four control the world's supply of corn, wheat, tobacco, tea, rice, pineapple, jute, timber and many other commodities."

In Britain, just 20 percent of the largest farmers receive 80 percent of agricultural subsidies. Similarly in the US, 60 percent of all subsidies, worth \$13.2 billion, go to the top 10 percent largest farming operations. Dr Peter Rosset of Food First, a California-based agricultural think-tank said, "It's a transfer of money to large multinational corporate farmers who dominate the world trade".

The application of modern industrial and scientific techniques to farming could go a long way towards eliminating the threat of animal diseases and provide food for the world's hungry. Instead, foot and mouth continues to thrive and new diseases like BSE are created because the conglomerates that dominate food production subordinate both human safety and animal welfare to their ceaseless quest for profits.



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