Europe's foot and mouth disease outbreak was foreseeable and preventable

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New outbreaks of foot and mouth disease (FMD) continue to be recorded daily in Britain. From the first case on February 21, the total has now reached 81, with instances reported in all parts of the country. At least 80,000 animals have been earmarked for slaughter, nearly eight times the original estimates.

With suspected cases in several European countries, the European Union has extended its ban on imports of any livestock, meat and milk products from Britain. Farms in France, Belgium and Germany have been ordered to destroy animals imported from the UK, or which have come into contact with such animals.

The epidemic of foot and mouth disease (FMD) is another example of the re-emergence of a disease once largely confined to more economically backward areas in Latin America, Asia and Africa, and practically eradicated from the advanced countries. The last major epidemic in Britain was in 1967. But last year saw outbreaks of the disease in Japan for the first time since 1908 and in South Korea—disease free since 1934.

Recognised as one of the most highly contagious diseases in animals, the virus rarely affects humans, but causes painful blisters around the mouth, nose, feet and teats of pigs, cattle and sheep. Most animals recover from the disease and its major impact is economic, with reduced milk yields and weight gain, abortions and the death of young animals.

International animal health bodies have existed for decades, but it is has been left up to national governments to decide if, or how, to implement controls. The resulting piecemeal approach has hampered the global eradication of the disease and the anarchic operation of global markets in animals and food products have made matters worse. According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) “the movement of people, animals and animal products for trade is leading to an increased spread of animal diseases across national borders”.

Where the disease has been controlled, individual governments have generally first quarantined the affected area, with any animals showing signs of the disease being destroyed, and carried out vaccination programs in a wider area. Measures are then put in place to prevent infected animals or meat products entering the area.

Although vaccines against FMD have existed for some 50 years, there are certain problems with relying purely on vaccination to combat the virus. The disease exists as seven different types, and immunity against one type does not guarantee immunity against another. Scientists have found that up to half of all vaccinated cattle can still carry the virus, and it is difficult to tell a vaccinated animal from one incubating the disease. The vaccine itself is sometimes unsafe and has caused outbreaks on occasions. Nevertheless, according to the FAO, in Europe, “the introduction of compulsory, mass, annual vaccination of cattle [during the 1950s and 1960s] dramatically reduced the incidence of the disease such that during 1990 no outbreaks were recorded.”

Within two years, however, the routine vaccination of animals against FMD in the European Union was banned. To understand why requires an understanding of FMD in Britain.

Whilst European countries have carried out extensive vaccination programmes, the UK has never done so. The measures employed to deal with FMD in Britain have changed little in 100 years. Until the end of the nineteenth century, because FMD was not fatal to adult animals, farmers put up with it. But then, under pressure from rich, aristocratic cattle breeders, the government brought in controls. At the time, Britain exported industrial goods and imported agricultural ones. The export of pedigree cattle for breeding purposes was one of Britain's few agricultural exports until after the Second World War. The government first imposed a policy of slaughtering all infected cattle, but exempted breeding stock. The cattle breeders also pushed for bans on imports from infected countries that had to eradicate the disease or lose their export market to the UK.

After the war, Britain turned to a policy of agricultural self-sufficiency and exports, with countries importing British animals and meat demanding it be FMD free. Most European countries, where the disease was very widespread, started using vaccines in 1952 as an alternative to slaughtering their national herds. Britain continued to promote its mass slaughter policy through the European Commission for Foot and Mouth Disease (ECFMD) that it helped to set up in 1954.

In 1985, the European Union (EU) had issued a Directive relating to FMD control that was weighted in favour of compulsory vaccination, but it was amended significantly in 1990. In order to establish the Single European Market by 1993, the EU sought to introduce a uniform policy. Mass slaughter was regarded as preferable to vaccination because outbreaks of FMD were resulting from faulty vaccines that contained virus that had not been inactivated. Disease-free status was vital for international trade, and it has proved difficult to distinguish between vaccinated animals and those that are incubating the disease.

Paul Pilotte, a Belgian veterinary inspector says, “it was the

English who pushed for abolishing Europe's foot and mouth vaccination programme and look where we are now. The English only value their land in order to extract profit from it and agriculture there has become an industry." The first half of this somewhat xenophobic statement is true, but the EU as a whole went along with Britain—with the new policy relying on import restrictions and border checks. An ECFMD report justified this decision, arguing that "By 1992 Europe was free of the disease and decided to stop the costly annual mass vaccination campaigns."

The mood at that time, described by some observers as "self congratulatory," was short lived.

In 1997 the EU reported that as a result of the move to mass slaughter rather than vaccination since 1991, "a fully susceptible farm animal population prevails at present in the EU countries, potentially threatened by border countries where the disease is enzootic [very widespread]. The disease currently represents a constant threat to Europe, as witnessed over the last 12 months in the Balkans, with the outbreaks in Italy (1993) and Greece (1994) supporting this concern about disease re-introduction in Europe."

A European Commission visit to the Confederation of Independent States (CIS-the former USSR) in 1998 reported, "No one from the central competent authorities was able to accompany the mission due to lack of funds," where staff had not been paid for months. The annual herd vaccination carried out in the USSR stopped in 1991 when the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Moreover, the collapse of the USSR, local wars in several of its constituent parts and privatisation of much of the state sector has decimated veterinary services across the massive landmass of the former Soviet Union. As a result, for example, Georgia had gone from virtually no FMD outbreaks in the 1980s to 32 outbreaks in 1997.

The US-led war against Iraq in 1991 also produced a rise in FMD, with several outbreaks recorded in 1999. As the FAO warned, "The animal disease situation in Iraq has been aggravated by the collapse of the veterinary infrastructure and disease investigation, surveillance and diagnostic services in the country. The government has been unable to adequately monitor and control the spread of these diseases, partly because of the difficulties it has in obtaining equipment and supplies, particularly vaccines."

Within Europe, the FAO warns that the creation of a single market, where animals are often transported long distances, increases the risk of diseases spreading. Typically, pigs remain four weeks in a breeding unit, seven weeks in a rearing unit and ten weeks in a fattening unit, often hundreds of kilometres apart, before going for slaughter. As well as these increased risks, the "institutional coherence" of many veterinary services "is being destroyed by the drive to reduce [the] public sector ... and the fragmentation of services caused by delegation of power from national to regional levels" says the FAO.

Cuts carried out in Britain's state veterinary services over the last ten years mean there are only half the number of regional animal health offices, with a fifth fewer vets.

Some commentators have sought to put the blame for the spread of FMD and other animal diseases on "globalisation" and the increased application of science and technology in agriculture. In contrast, the FAO's senior officer for emergency prevention and infectious diseases, Mark Rweyemamu, says, "In terms of technology, we should be able to avoid such a catastrophe. We have the tools. The system for quick response and containment is much improved, provided those concerned are sufficiently alerted."

"In an increasingly globalised world veterinary surveillance systems and services are vital to detect these diseases early enough and to prepare contingency plans to contain those outbreaks. Veterinary services should not be considered as a luxury—they must be supported to avoid future disasters," he continued.

Moreover, as Abigail Woods, a qualified vet currently undertaking a PhD study on the history of animal plagues, points out, "Changing farming practices have long been blamed for FMD introduction and spread, including the use of manufactured, non-organic feedstuffs. In addition, long distance transport of livestock is nothing new... The movement away from local breeding, rearing, fattening, slaughter and marketing of livestock began over 150 years ago with the industrial revolution." (See *WSWS* interview with Abigail Woods)

The advances in agricultural productivity associated with the rise of capitalism were also necessary to provide a more reliable and abundant source of food for the mass of workers required in the factories and offices. However, like any other commodity, the production of food is subordinated to the profit interests of the corporate elite. Public safety and animal welfare come a poor second to the drive for rising profits and the intense competition this unleashes.

Faced with the collapse in Korea's meat exports to Japan because of FMD, American agribusiness saw an opportunity to promote its own interests. "The longer it takes Korea to regain FMD free status the more time US pork suppliers will have to increase market share in Japan," was the conclusion reached by the United States Department of Agriculture last year in its report entitled *Bottom Line: Impact on US trade*.

Implementing small-scale local agricultural production and wholly organic methods, as advocated by those like the Greens, would mean a return to pre-industrial population levels.

The real question is to release the potential benefits of globalisation and scientific farming methods from their present subordination to anarchic market forces and the narrow pursuit of profit.