

Trade barriers go up as foot and mouth disease spreads to France

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France confirmed an outbreak of foot and mouth disease Tuesday March 13, after widespread speculation that the disease had crossed the Channel from England.

British imports were blamed for the outbreak, after six cows were destroyed on a farm in the Mayenne region of northwest France. The six animals were the first to show signs of the blistering and lesions associated with the disease. All other livestock on the farm was slaughtered in an attempt to prevent the spread of the disease, with many fearing it will become a pan-European epidemic.

Outside Europe, cases have also been reported in Argentina and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The first case in Argentina threatens the country's \$500m beef export sector. In the UAE, eight cases of foot and mouth have been discovered. The UAE responded by banning the import of animals and birds without prior permission.

The first confirmed case in France was at a farm next to a holding unit that had received British sheep. These were destroyed three weeks ago, but it appears to have been too late to prevent the disease from spreading. Three other cases were reported in France, all of which were linked to the Mayenne outbreak. A suspected case in Italy was reported among sheep imported from France, some of which might have come originally from Britain.

The crisis has serious economic consequences for European agriculture. Some three hundred million animals are at risk and a number of countries have already imposed import bans on meat from the European Union (EU). The United States and Canada immediately announced a ban on all European meat imports upon confirmation of the first case in France. They were quickly followed by Australia, New Zealand

and South Korea, while Japan imposed a ban on meat from the UK and France.

As with the issue of BSE/Mad Cow Disease, legitimate concerns over the possible spread of the disease are fuelling an already intense trade conflict internationally. At least partly responsible for the speed with which the US responded is the fact that Europe had previously imposed its own ban on the importing of hormone-treated US beef. According to the *New York Times*, the American ban "prompted some European officials to complain that the Bush administration was overreacting." In defending the action the *New York Times* says, "But three members of the European Union—Belgium, Portugal and Spain—are closing their borders to French meat, as is Switzerland. Norway banned imports of French farm products, and Germany and Italy took protective measures... Argentina said it would voluntarily restrict beef exports."

Britain remains the country worst affected by the current outbreak. With the number of identified cases in Britain having risen to 205 Wednesday, all efforts at containment have clearly failed. The situation is now officially recognised as being worse than that of 1967—the last serious foot and mouth epidemic effecting British livestock. Although the number of farms where the disease has been confirmed is still lower than at the same stage of the 1967 crisis, the emergence of large-scale farming means much greater numbers of animals are effected.

Farms are today six times larger than the average holding in 1967 and keep more than 1,000 animals compared to an average of just 100 in 1967. The average number of animals to be slaughtered in each confirmed outbreak has risen from fewer than 200 in 1967 to more than 600 today.

The present size of flocks and herds is also a factor in

how far the disease has spread. In 1967, it was much easier to spot a few sick sheep among a smaller flock, but among 1,000 or more animals this is much more difficult. Even as the slaughter proceeds, new outbreaks are already being prepared, as infected animals remain undetected.

Coming as it does in the aftermath of the BSE crisis, the impact upon British agriculture has been devastating, and could bankrupt many of the country's few remaining small farmers. Farming accounts for just two percent of the workforce in Britain, with only 20 percent of farms being family owned.

The economic impact of the present outbreak is already being felt beyond the agricultural sector, however. The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) has written to the British Bankers' Association, the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise (responsible for tax collection) and the Local Government Association urging them to show restraint in their demands for repayments of loans and overdrafts, tax, national insurance contributions and business rates in the wake of the foot and mouth crisis.

The FSB website says it is not just farmers who are experiencing difficulties because of the crisis: "Businesses in the transport, retail, leisure, tourism and service sectors in particular are now facing problems due to the spread of foot and mouth cases."

The tourist and leisure industry has already lost millions of pounds, as movement has been restricted in rural areas, and major sporting fixtures such as the Cheltenham horse races have been postponed or cancelled.

Whatever the final economic toll of the foot and mouth crisis, it has already sparked a political crisis for Britain's Labour government. The local council elections are due to take place on May 3, and Prime Minister Tony Blair had been expected to call a general election for the same day. He now has less than two weeks to decide whether to proceed with plans for a May 3 general election or to postpone it. Should he delay the poll until June or even sometime in the autumn, the government would have to introduce emergency legislation to postpone the local elections and allow the existing councils to rule for a further 12 months.

Blair is keen to go to the polls and win a historic second term for Labour on the back of a stable

economy. Were the elections to be postponed, there is the strong possibility that the economic crisis already unfolding in the US and Japan could have a major impact on Britain and create major problems for Blair.

Although a general election is not required until May 2002, it is rare for a government to wait until the end of its first term in office, and is generally regarded as a sign of weakness. Sections of the media, most notably Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper, have encouraged Labour to go to the polls now and clear the way for a further shift to the right in its second term. However, the electoral wheels that have been set in motion are meeting with significant obstacles due to the foot and mouth crisis. Rural MPs across all parties have expressed reservations about the advisability of holding elections under conditions where those living in the countryside could not participate. Labour's local government chief, Jeremy Beecham, tried to dismiss this, declaring it to be a "non-issue." He said, "Anyone can apply for a postal vote and post is being delivered to outer reaches of farms. The Tories do not have any door-to-door canvassers. They do it by phone."

Nevertheless the fear remains that the government could be accused of fixing the election, given that most rural constituencies return Conservative MPs. There is also the possibility that an election held under these conditions would contravene the recently enacted Human Rights Act, introduced by Labour to bring Britain into line with the rest of Europe. The Act enshrines "free and fair elections at reasonable intervals, in conditions which will ensure free expression of opinion."

The rightwing nationalist and anti-European UK Independence Party has already vowed to use the Human Rights Act to force Blair to abandon plans for a May election.



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