

# Britain: Foot and mouth disease "an epidemic waiting to happen"

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After nearly a month, there is no let up in the spread of foot and mouth disease in the UK. At the time of writing over 435 outbreaks have been diagnosed, with most being in the south west of England and in Scotland. However, occurrences also exist in many other regions, including Wales and Northern Ireland.

Epidemiologist Professor Roy Anderson, called in by the Ministry of Agriculture to advise on the crisis, called the present outbreak "an epidemic waiting to happen". He told the BBC that the number of cases will keep growing until early May, making the present outbreak far worse than the 1967 epidemic in the UK. It would be at least five months before the disease was eliminated.

Professor Anderson expressed criticism of the rundown in veterinary resources, "there has been a steady decline... in the amount of resources available for veterinary surveillance in dealing with crises of this sort."

"If we don't put enough public resources into surveillance, both in the veterinary context and the human context, then we must be prepared to pay the consequences when we do have a crisis." Adding, "And this one already has had very considerable consequences."

The Labour government is now proposing a mass cull policy, which will mean slaughtering thousands of healthy animals in areas close to known outbreaks. The size of the slaughter is already overwhelming the capacity of vets, slaughtermen and agriculture ministry officials, with dead animals being left for days on some farms before their disposal can be arranged.

All meat and animal products are banned for export, the transportation of livestock is presently subject to obtaining special permits and infected farms are quarantined. There are widespread restrictions on

public movement in parts of the countryside and the army is being deployed to provide logistical support in organising the mass cull, and assist with building massive pyres on which the slaughtered cattle, sheep and pigs can be burnt.

An atmosphere of barely concealed panic pervades government offices in Whitehall, with different departments issuing conflicting press statements. The Agriculture Ministry says the public should avoid all areas where outbreaks have occurred. Local authorities have closed many countryside footpaths, and the National Trust and English Heritage are not allowing the public onto much of the land and many of the estates they administer.

The result has been an almost total shutdown of all rural pursuits and tourism, even in areas with no or only few outbreaks. The tourist industry is citing losses of up to £100m a week, caused by lost bookings and severely reduced visitor numbers, leading to a massive outcry from those whose businesses are being hit at the start of the busy Easter season. Estimates are that some £14m a week is being lost in meat exports, but while farmers will receive compensation for herds and flocks that are destroyed, tour operators, hoteliers and the host of small businesses that cater for visitors to Britain's rural tourist attractions will not receive a penny.

As a result, the government has set up a "Rural Task Force" headed by Environment Minister Michael Meacher, whose main job is to counteract the impression given by the Agriculture Ministry that it is not safe for the public to visit the countryside, or that they are not allowed to do so.

In contrast to the government-ordered mass cull of healthy livestock, many senior vets and experts in the field of animal welfare believe an emergency vaccination policy would not only be more effective in

eradicating the present outbreaks, it would also ensure Britain rapidly regained its disease-free status.

This view was recently highlighted in a paper produced by the Elm Farm Research Centre, an educational charity that promotes organic agriculture.

The emergency vaccines employed would have a high “payload” making them rapidly effective when used in a single dose. According to Elm Farm, “They have been shown to be effective as early as 3 days after immunisation, in prevention of infection and disease. Within between 4 and 7 days all immunised cattle and sheep are prevented from becoming ‘amplifiers’ capable of onward transmission. This period is shorter than the period between the proposed cull and the expected start of the slaughter!”

As the paper points out, an emergency vaccination strategy that was vigorously promoted and financially supported by the European Union (EU) proved very effective in controlling outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in Albania and neighbouring Macedonia in 1996. “The outbreaks were eliminated within 12 weeks and 3 weeks respectively. The former was the first outbreak in the region and therefore international responses were delayed. In the latter an area as large as Cumbria was involved and 120,000 cattle were vaccinated and a further 4,500 destroyed.”

The present outbreak in the UK meets all the EU's criteria for an emergency vaccination programme, which is an approved form of control, especially where there is a high density of susceptible animals and where there exists an adequate infrastructure for deployment of the vaccines. The EU also possesses the equivalent of 11m sheep doses suitable for the present outbreak, with 1m immediately available in the UK.

Emergency vaccination has a proven record in controlling foot and mouth disease, by creating an “immune barrier” preventing its further spread, particularly airborne, and in “damping down” existing outbreaks.

Elm Farm argue that employing emergency vaccination would enable the UK to achieve disease free status within 3 months given, “Vaccination in the restricted zones to prevent transmission and risk to surrounding areas, followed by slaughter of vaccinated animals and active cases.” At most, they envisage it taking 12 months.

As the paper points out, it is the economic loss

associated with a livestock export ban that is regarded as the “strongest argument against implementation of emergency vaccination.”

Those opposing a vaccination programme say it precludes a resumption of exports, since disease free status cannot be guaranteed, because it is not possible to distinguish between animals that have been vaccinated from those that have come into contact with the disease. However, there are at least 5 tests available now that can distinguish between infected animals and those that have been vaccinated.

Foot and mouth disease poses almost no risk to human health, and is not usually fatal in animals. Government measures are aimed at trying to protect the interests of a agribusiness and Britain's export market in animal products.

The first outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in Holland have been dealt with in a very different manner. Some 18,000 animals in a one-kilometre zone immediately around the outbreaks will be slaughtered. Then all livestock in an outer zone will be vaccinated to control the spread of the disease. The Dutch authorities say once all signs of foot and mouth have been eradicated, the vaccinated animals will be killed and disposed of “in an orderly fashion”.

Elm Farm Research Centre: The case for a change of policy to utilise vaccination in the strategy to control foot and mouth disease

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