

An expert's view on why foot and mouth disease has reemerged in Britain

Paul Mitchell
8 March 2001

Abigail Woods is a qualified veterinarian undertaking a PhD study at the Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine at Manchester University, where she is working on a Wellcome Trust project on the history of animal plagues. Here she tells the World Socialist Web Site her views on the current outbreak of foot and mouth disease.

* * *

WSWS: Do you think the present policy of mass slaughter is justified, given that foot and mouth disease (FMD) is not fatal?

AW: I am not suggesting slaughter is unjustified; I feel it is more justified today than ever in the past. My point is to unpick the various forces at work in this policy and how they have evolved over time.

WSWS: You suggest British policy developed a long time ago based on the economic threat to a few wealthy and influential breeders? Where did you obtain this information?

AW: This was the conclusion from my MSc thesis, "Foot and Mouth Disease: Occupational Hazard or Animal Plague" (Manchester, 1999), and was based on extensive archival research from Parliamentary Papers, Parliamentary Debates, 19th Century Farming and Veterinary Journals and newspapers.

I am unaware of the exact situation outside Britain. However, the general approach internationally seems to have been to totally ignore the disease, at least in the 19th Century.

WSWS: Why do you think successive British governments have been against vaccination?

AW: Vaccination was never intended for use in Britain except in emergency situations, i.e. wartime or attack by biological weapons. In these cases, it was realised the disease may get so out of hand that slaughter would be impossible. However, the Ministry

of Agriculture were keen for other nations to vaccinate, since this would reduce disease incidence overseas and therefore the threat of FMD importation into Britain. The realisation that if farmers knew a vaccination existed they would lobby for its application in Britain led the Ministry to keep much of this research secret until the mid 1950s.

WSWS: Do you have any information about the UK pressurising Europe to change its vaccination policy in 1990?

AW: This information is drawn from an unpublished paper I have by WHG Rees. Vaccination did markedly reduce disease in Europe, but by the later 1970s it became clear that several FMD outbreaks could be linked to the use of vaccines—i.e. virus escaping from production plants or incomplete inactivation of virus in the vaccine. In addition, the lower incidence of disease meant that the economics of vaccination was questionable. The European Commission therefore strongly advocated slaughter instead of vaccination. This was not adopted until the formation of the internal EC market in the early 1990s, when free trade meant that the UK would no longer be able to prohibit the importation of vaccinated animals, as had been the case.

Therefore European nations that still vaccinated were persuaded to stop and adopt the slaughter policy. This was believed to offer greater disease security than vaccination.

WSWS: Do you think there was any link with the BSE/Mad Cow disease crisis? It was just beginning to surface at about the same time as the European policy change on FMD vaccination.

AW: Foot and mouth disease and BSE are completely different entities. BSE was a new, unknown disease which initially baffled scientific experts and is still not

properly understood. FMD is a long-standing problem; the scientific and epidemiological basis of the disease is well understood and the methods of management are tried and tested. The only point of similarity lies in culling infected and potentially infected stock, and in fact this is the Ministry of Agriculture's standard method for controlling all contagious animal diseases.

WSWS: There is an international, established but complicated protocol to control FMD. Countries are classified with different statuses e.g. FMD-free, vaccinated zones in infected areas. How has this come about?

AW: I am not well versed in overseas policies; my research has focussed upon Britain. However, these different means of tackling FMD are formulated upon the basis of practicalities and economics. Obviously nations with poor infrastructure, extensive farming and large wild game populations cannot maintain the surveillance necessary to quickly detect FMD, nor would slaughter be a feasible option.

WSWS: Why do you think the outbreak has happened in Britain rather than another EU country?

AW: It's difficult to say; any nation that imports meat and livestock products from an FMD infected area could potentially be infected by the disease. The Ministry of Agriculture believe illegally imported meat to be the root cause of FMD introduction, but presumably this could have occurred in any nation. Inspection of imports can never guarantee 100 percent disease security, however thorough.

WSWS: What do you say to arguments against preventative vaccination, that it is difficult to distinguish infected from vaccinated animals?

AW: It's important to distinguish vaccination as a means of preventing the disease taking hold in a disease-free nation, and vaccination as a strategy to assist disease elimination. Each presents its own set of technical problems. While the vaccination question is at present raised in the context of the latter situation, many technical problems relating to the former are stated in order to provide additional authority to the arguments against vaccination. While vaccination undoubtedly involves technical problems I personally feel they are overstated in order to justify the pre-existing decision not to vaccinate rather than to inform that decision.

Reluctance to vaccinate is due to the fact that this

would imply to other nations that the disease was out of control. This stems from the fact that traditionally, vaccination was used to reduce high-incidence endemic FMD to a sporadic level, which could be controlled by stamping out. Abandonment of slaughter and uptake of vaccination in order to control FMD is therefore perceived as a retrograde step and would do nothing to convince foreign nations of the fitness of British exports.

* * *

Abigail Woods has issued a fact sheet and press release explaining the history of FMD in Britain.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact