

Britain: Inquiries into foot and mouth epidemic to be held behind closed doors

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British farmers' leaders have accused the Labour government of conducting a media campaign to discredit them and deflect criticism from "its own bungled handling of the foot and mouth disease crisis".

Foot and mouth disease (FMD), which broke out in Britain in February and still continues to afflict several areas of the country, is one of the most highly contagious animal diseases. It causes painful blisters around the mouth, nose, feet and teats of pigs, cattle and sheep. It is not usually fatal and most animals eventually recover from the disease. Its major impact is economic, with reduced milk yields and lower weight gain, abortions and the premature death of young animals. Exports of meat and animal products are banned from affected countries.

So far, the disease has cost £2.2 billion and the figure may reach £10 billion, this includes the cost of farmers' compensation, the animal slaughter programme, farm disinfection and losses to the tourism industry in many rural areas. Even the amount spent so far exceeds the £570 million worth of meat exports that the government's policy was meant to protect.

Over nine thousand farms have been affected and nearly five million animals slaughtered. Another 1.3 million lambs normally sold to France and Italy are to be slaughtered because they cannot be exported.

Despite constant government assurances that FMD is under control, there are fears that the disease is taking off again. New outbreaks have occurred in Thirsk, North Yorkshire, a few miles from some of the country's largest pig farms. Until now the disease has been largely confined to sheep and cattle. However, pigs spread the disease much faster because the virus is 3,000 times more concentrated in their breath.

Nine million sheep that graze freely in some of Britain's hilly areas may have become reservoirs of

FMD, and risk spreading the disease as they are brought back to farms in the valleys for the winter. New outbreaks have appeared recently in the Brecon Beacons in Wales, resulting in the slaughter of 10,500 hill sheep. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals stated, "We could be back at square one within a matter of weeks of the sheep being brought down, which would leave us with no choice but to start culling and restriction all over again."

Farmers are especially angry at a media campaign that has depicted them as profiteering from the FMD crisis. Last week, the government released details about compensation payments to 37 farmers of at least £1 million each. The largest payment is believed to be £4.2 million, to Jim Goldie a farmer in Scotland who has lost all his pedigree Limousin and Charolais cattle.

There have been allegations that livestock valuers, on whose estimations compensation claims are assessed and who receive one per cent of each valuation made, have been colluding with farmers to bump-up the market price of slaughtered stock. Jeremy Moody of the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers said some of his members were expressing "extreme concern" about a minority of valuers.

At the end of July, the government imposed a two-week moratorium on the disinfection programme of English farms hit by the disease, after it emerged that private contractors were charging an average of £100,000 to clean a farm. This figure was three times the cost in Scotland, where local authorities controlled the clean up, and ten times that in Europe. According to John Thorley, director of the National Sheep Association, "Some of us thought farmers or the Army should have been made to do the work. They would have no self-interest. But some of these contractors appear to have been profiteering and it has been in their

interest to see the spread of the disease”.

At about the same time, reports appeared suggesting some farmers were deliberately infecting their flocks in order to receive compensation. A sheep that fetches only £10 at market can be worth £90 in compensation payments. Nuala Preston, a Welsh farmer, told the *Independent on Sunday* she was offered an infected sheep for sale for £2,000. Another farmer, Philip Hosking from Devon, said he was also approached with a similar offer.

There are undoubtedly some who have exploited the generous compensation payments available, but the National Farmers Union (NFU) accusation of a concerted government media campaign directed against farmers does contain a grain of truth.

The government has ignored the lessons of last epidemic to hit the UK. Despite the warnings from the 1967 outbreak, contingency plans developed by the agricultural ministry were based on a scenario where outbreaks occurred on only ten farms. Minutes of a meeting of agriculture ministers and officials show that by March 21 this year, as the number of outbreaks was rising exponentially, they had become paralysed in the face of the spreading epidemic. Critically, the use of vaccines to contain the spread of the disease was ruled out, as this would have meant Britain losing its FMD-free status, vital for the international meat export market. Instead, the government sought to eradicate the disease through a policy of mass slaughter, with compensation paid to farmers whose herds and flocks were ordered to be destroyed.

More fundamentally, the government media campaign over alleged abuses is being used to facilitate significant agricultural policy changes. Despite their present mutual recriminations, the NFU—which mainly represents the interests of the export driven large farmers—and government are agreed on the main task: The need to clear out the small agricultural producers and perfect a modernised and profitable “market oriented” farming industry in the global market. Such a move is made all the more urgent given the prospect of European Union (EU) enlargement, bringing in Eastern European countries with significant agricultural sectors.

Without the compensation payments, most small farmers whose livestock have been affected by FMD would face bankruptcy.

But as in other sectors of the economy, polarisation

between the rich and poor has also occurred in agriculture. Just twenty percent of farmers receive 80 percent of all subsidies. Small farmers, many of whom earn less than £5,000 per annum, are being squeezed by the huge agribusinesses. Cuts in public services have led to significant numbers of local abattoirs being closed, forcing the transportation of animals over ever greater distances, increasing the likelihood of infections spreading from one area to another. In addition, a handful of supermarket chains dominate food distribution putting further cost pressures on farmers.

The government has so far refused to hold a public inquiry into the FMD outbreak. Instead, ten separate smaller inquiries are to be held, including non-governmental bodies such as the Commons Tourism Committee, Commons Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office.

The three government inquiries to be held are primarily concerned with developing a strategy for a “profitable and sustainable” farming industry. The reasons for the FMD outbreak and its lessons are only a secondary aspect of the inquiries, which are to be held behind closed doors and do not have the power to subpoena individuals and documents. No transcripts from the proceedings are to be published, only the final recommendations.

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