

Britain: government site responsible for foot and mouth outbreak

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A British government-controlled laboratory site has been confirmed as the source of an outbreak of foot and mouth, which affects farm animals.

In addition to the government being faced with the prospect of huge compensation claims, the confirmation more broadly raises fundamental issues as to public health safety—a fact underscored by the latest news that a worker at the facility has contracted Legionnaires' disease, with the laboratory a possible source of contamination.

The last outbreak of foot and mouth disease was in 2001. Many areas of Britain were affected and more than 6 million farm animals were culled in attempts to contain it. It is estimated to have cost around £8 billion. Many farmers left the industry as a result. Many small countryside-based businesses were under severe financial pressure as visitors were deterred. The general election of that year was postponed for several weeks because of the impact of the disease.

The millions of culled animals were disposed of by burning huge funeral pyres of their carcasses. The eerie image of burning animals with a huge plume of black smoke rising against the skyline became iconic.

The site at Pirbright, Surrey, in southeast England contains the government-run Institute for Animal Health (IAH) and the privately owned Merial Animal Health Company, which manufactures commercial vaccines for foot and mouth disease.

The government's Chief Veterinary Officer, Debby Reynolds, confirmed that cattle on Woolford farm near Guilford, Surrey, had foot and mouth disease on August 3. This is a highly contagious viral infection that affects cattle, sheep, pigs and goats. It produces lesions on the mouth and legs and leads to severe debilitation.

The report led to the establishment of a 3-kilometre

(1.9-mile) protection zone around the farm with a further surveillance zone around it with a 10-kilometre (6.2-mile) radius. Tests confirmed that 39 animals had the disease and more than 100 cattle were culled to try to contain it. But on Tuesday, a second outbreak of the disease was confirmed at another farm within the 10-kilometre zone, and a further 100 cattle were culled. Tests results are also awaited at a third farm in the area.

The farm where the original outbreak was confirmed is only a few miles from the Pirbright government site. The government Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) scientists were quickly able to establish the genetic make-up of the virus that was responsible for the first outbreak. They identified it as belonging to a strain not currently found in the wild, but an "historic" strain of virus responsible for previous outbreaks of the disease. The only conclusion was that it originated in the Pirbright site.

The government Health and Safety Executive (HSE) carried out an investigation and issued an initial report on possible breaches of biosecurity at the Pirbright site. The report admits that the virus strain had been worked on between July 14 and 25 at both the Merial site where large-scale production had taken place and at the IAH site where there had been a series of small-scale experiments.

It largely ruled out either airborne release of the virus or escape through water such as sewage or streams. Airborne escape was considered unlikely, as filters at the site were said to be working efficiently and weather patterns over the last period appeared to rule out wind blowing a plume of virus towards the affected farms. Despite flooding having taken place recently in the area, waterborne transmission was also unlikely considering the directions of water courses and the distance involved.

This means that the most likely course of transmission is through contact with individuals from the government site, presumably carrying the virus.

Rather than admitting the culpability of the government for a lapse in biosecurity—the safety of the site is the responsibility of government inspectors—the report focussed on individual employees and even suggested that the outbreak might not be the result of an accidental safety lapse but deliberate sabotage. Workers at the site are now being subjected to security checks and the spectre of “bioterrorism” has been raised.

The HSE investigation into the source of the outbreak is expected to last another week. Informal press reports would suggest that the safety regime is far from satisfactory at a site that is supposed to have the highest level of biosecurity—category four—the same level as facilities that deal with germ warfare research such as Porton Down.

The IAH facility at Pirbright deals with other potentially dangerous pathogens including variant CJD (Mad Cow Disease), avian flu and bluetongue. It is the only site in Britain permitted to experiment with live foot and mouth virus.

The government has denied claims that the site also handles anthrax bacteria, sometimes used in germ warfare.

Reports indicate that despite the extremely sensitive nature of the work conducted at the site, it has suffered from severe underfunding. A report in 2002 condemned the state of several of the buildings, some which date from the Second World War. The head of the IAH, Professor Martin Shirley, responding to a critical report on the facility last year said, “We’re trying to deliver a Rolls-Royce service for surveillance in the UK but really we are being funded more and more at the level of a Ford Cortina.”

Environment Secretary Hilary Benn, who is in charge of DEFRA, has claimed that the facilities at Pirbright were being redeveloped after the damning 2002 report. However, the *Guardian* of August 7 cited figures showing that the funding for the IAH laboratory “fell in real terms from £9.1m to £7.6m between 2003/4 and 2005/6.” It also claimed that the laboratory was understaffed, having lost a fifth of the workforce over the last five years. Written evidence from the IAH submitted to parliament last year noted that the

laboratory equipment was “in desperate need of investment.”

Merial, the private firm that is also based at the Pirbright site, is part of a global corporation in the animal health business. It was formed in 1997 through a merger of the American company Merck and the French company Rhone Meriieux. Its worldwide sales last year mounted to more than US\$2 billion and it employs 5,000 staff worldwide. It voluntarily ceased live foot and mouth vaccine production at the Pirbright site, but it has been commissioned to produce 300,000 doses of vaccine for possible use in the current outbreak should attempts to halt its spread by culling and containment fail.

In spite of the HSE report saying that it had not come across any reported incidents of breach of working practices or spillages at Merial, the *Independent* of August 8 said, “There were reports yesterday that staff had complained the system was ‘leaky as a sieve’ and contaminated workers mixed with dinner ladies in the staff canteen at Merial.”

Current investigations by the HSE are said to be concentrating on the drainage system at Merial.

Following the confirmation of the outbreak of foot and mouth last Friday, the European Union banned exports of live animals and meat products from Britain. On Thursday, the ban of all animal movements in the UK was lifted for livestock outside the surveillance zone, despite investigations into the possibility of a third outbreak. The Chief Veterinary Officer said it was still “very early” to determine whether or not the outbreak was under control. There was a low but not negligible risk that the disease might spread from the surveillance zone to the rest of the country.

The government denied that the move had been made for economic reasons.



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