

As the toll of slaughtered animals mounts the number of individuals and families directly affected grows. For the majority, membership of an unwelcome club. For each person involved the recent past and the recent future will be a pivotal point in their life. Children see the dead sheep, cattle and pigs. They possibly also witness the culling. They will remember and recall and possibly recount to their grandchildren. Defining moments when the vet arrives. The look on the face of their father or mother when they take **the** call, when they realise that their farm is to be included on the list. These are literally shocking times.

Hardened farmers are in a state of numbness and many have shed a tear whether openly or privately. Two different local cases show some of the stresses. The first is a father shivering for three days. He simply could not get warm. Two sons on the farm not so affected. They all helped with the slaughter and complimented the vets and slaughterers on their approach. The cows were injected and went to lie down in the cubicles where they were shot. Welfare friendly for the cattle but the carcasses remained for a week and they were not easy to extricate from the housing for burning. This family is now looking to the future.

Secondly the spinster farming alone with what many would describe as an unprofitable unit. No money in it but a love for animals. She refused to allow her sucklers to go for slaughter when burning of over thirty month cattle came in. It was alright for them to go as meat pies but not as waste. Kept as pets you could say. She pays the vets bill before buying anything for herself. A typical, 'Oh while you're here' client I'm sure. Her beasts are expected to be slaughtered as a close contact farm. Very difficult for her to grasp that there was nothing she could have done to prevent what is to occur. She dreads that day of death. She will be unlikely to be part of the livestock keeping community next year.

Information about the crisis is gleaned by farmers from all sorts of sources. Local knowledge is more important than national statistics or political waffle. The appearance of a vet in overalls and boots is enough to stop farmers wives driving in that direction. Keep yourself to yourself. Keep out is the order of the day. Children were kept home from school initially until it was realised that the outbreak wasn't going to be all over in a couple of weeks. Socialising has stopped. Skittles leagues cancelled. The telephone is the social vehicle. Farmers wives have expressed gratitude for the letters from neighbours, friends and strangers who have seen that they are affected. Starkly the website announces: Home farm (252 cattle, 108 sheep).

Some dairy farmers who rented out the land for winter sheep have lost their cows. A trader is revelling in the compensation and boasting down the pub. This leaves a sour taste and will not be forgotten. A few have broken the rules and possibly put neighbours at risk. This will not strengthen community life. The disease expands and the culling boundaries are pushed outward. For nine hundred farmers the deed has been done and the buildings are empty What happens now? Farmers are asking 'what can we do now?' 'What can we grow, if anything'? The first day of spring is past. If land is to be ploughed and planted time is important. Important practically but even more important emotionally. Hitch up the tractor, turn up the radio, be busy. But at present the messages are unclear. If they plough land that has carried sheep will they risk burying the virus and keeping the disease? Questions, questions, questions. As the answers come through many farmers will make progress. Some will not.

The local papers are promoting Green Wellie Day whereas the national media is developing agri-bashing as an art form. A dozen people ran around a local town for an hour at the weekend and collected over two hundred and fifty pounds. A small part of the thousands of pounds that is being harvested to help farmers in need. Organising collections and giving are some of the many ways that people are demonstrating that they share concerns about disease in the countryside.

Over the coming weeks the personal impact of Foot and Mouth Disease and the recovery will be charted for the dairy farmer, shepherd and veterinary practice. If you wish to share your experience please contact Richard via rga@agmed.freeserve.co.uk