

The dairy farmer's view.*Published 30th April 2001*

One of the local FMD stories concerns an MP whose office telephoned a farm because they had become infected and the stock slaughtered. The MP wanted to hear first hand how they were coping. The farmer's wife said she thought he better speak to her husband. 'Oh is he there' says the caller, 'I thought he would be milking the cows'.

A month ago such insensitivity and lack of awareness would make people angry. Now they just nod knowingly.

Many more farmers are now looking for firm guidance as to what they can do and when. One of the important considerations is that for dairy herds that are slaughtered from early April onwards they are unlikely to be back in milk production this year. Work on the land has to be done soon. If sheep have grazed the fields to be used for the cows there is concern over the ability to use the grass. Without access to the fields it will be too late to manage adequate crops of silage for next winter for many farms.

Farms that have already been slaughtered are anxious for accurate information as to when they can get out onto the pasture. For the early slaughtered farms in February and March the cleaning and disinfecting is well on, the fields are waiting and restocking can be planned. But from when? There are different views. The most optimistic is three months from slaughter but of course stock cannot be moved within an infected area.

Compensation that is planned by government is considered by dairy farmers to be compulsory purchase of the stock not a financial reprieve from the disease. The Foot and Mouth crisis for dairy farms has to be considered against the low profitability from milk in 1999/2000. Year on year since 1995 most dairy farmers have seen profits fall to a minimal level in 2000. This is no false complaint. There are no fat pockets of surplus profit to tide over the Foot & Mouth effects. A figure of 1p per litre profitability is currently realistic. If you do the sums 100,000 litres at 1p is £1000. A production of 650,000 litres yields £6500. Adjust these figures how you like but it is not a good story. The accounts simply show that the Foot & Mouth crisis will allow some dairy farmers to retire with dignity.

There are many lurking shadows but to date the impact for a local 100 cow family farm within an infected area includes disruption to servicing and sales. Last cow served by AI was February 27th. No expectation of being permitted to have the AI man at the moment. Twenty down calvers in Jan/Feb have not been served and twenty heifers that would have been put to the bull cannot be accommodated because the hired bull cannot be brought onto the farm. Do it yourself AI would be possible but no one on the farm is trained. Four cull cows should have been sent for slaughter. Two have been dried off and two have mastitis. It is not clear if they can be shot on the farm and disposed of under the Over Thirty Month Scheme. At the moment they are eating scarce fodder and possibly acting as a mastitic infection source for other cows.

Store bullocks ready for slaughter are unable to be sent to market. Bull calves that would have been sold after three months or so, together with young store bullocks normally sold on to a fatterer, have to be kept. Altogether over forty additional mouths to feed and a delayed cash flow. Silage is being bought along with other feed and bedding. All vehicles have extensive disinfection and no outsiders approach the stock. The wet spring has delayed turn-out. The idea of keeping the stock indoors for the duration of the crisis appears untenable.

Cows that should calve in the winter of 2001 and milk next spring need to be served now. There has to be a drop in production for herds with no servicing and this opens up the question of quota shortfall. Quota not fulfilled by 31st March 2002 cannot be rolled over to the next year. Lost production is gone forever even if the FMD outbreak ends now.

Many farmers are considering how having the disease would affect them. It is assumed that the price of cows to restock will be greater than the money received on slaughter. It is also realistic to expect a build up of stock over months rather than the purchase of a whole herd. It may be that imported heifers will be required. Realistically farmers would not expect to achieve more than eighty per cent of their current position within twelve months from slaughter.

It has been possible to insure against Foot & Mouth. Insurance is not extensive but would provide living expenses until production starts again, but does this apply to contingent farms? For a farmer whose stock is not actually infected, but has the slaughterers in, is he able to claim?

A point repeatedly made is that the dairy farmer considers himself to be relatively lucky. He at least has some income from the milk. Dairymen recognise how much more serious the FMD restrictions are for neighbours who are livestock producers.