

Contiguous Cull Disease

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Ernest is due for the chop. He has been on loan from the home farm to a relative to provide good service over the winter and he is in the wrong place at the wrong time. There will be no problem with the slaughtering. Despite his size, weight and manly proportions he is a bull of kindly disposition. Like many in the countryside Ernest has become involved in the new contiguous cull disease.

Early on with the FMD crisis a great deal was heard about dangerous contacts. This seemed straightforward and farmers understood that their stock was culled because they were over the fence from infected stock or some human transfer was suspected. The dangerous contact listing was interpreted as sensible in that the stock do not have the disease today but they are likely to get it tomorrow. A certainty of 99% as one farmer was told by the 'ministry epidemiologist'.

Dangerous contacts, farmers consider, are often able to be identified by themselves and the farm is usually treated as though the disease had been present. Permission needed before leaving the farm and a record of people visiting. Full clean up and disinfection after slaughter and the farmer paid to assist. With gates having to be taken off and hangers cleaned, workshop tools disinfected along with screws and nails, this could take quite some time. With consideration of the hours normally worked one fairly successful young dairy farmer confessed that, at £10, he has never been paid so much per hour in his life.

With contiguous cull the ground rules are far from clear. It might be reasonable to assume that the farmers would welcome the purchase of their stock, a few weeks employment and a restful summer, but they hate it. They hate the whole idea of it. The contiguous cull may be essential in many circumstances but farmers have difficulty in understanding how prevention of the disease is served by animal removal distant from any risk. The land is not the carrier of infection but ownership of the land by a carrier owner has become the indicator for culling.

Barriers have been placed across farm entrances by people who have never opposed an official before in their life. Legal interpretations of righteous acts have been nailed to gateposts and it has worked. Imminent slaughter that was so necessary on Tuesday has not been followed up a week later. Maybe an official will return with weightier pieces of paper and maybe the cull will go ahead but the basis for the decisions are not easily understood.

Infection in livestock is a veterinary topic. Farmers know vets and although the consequences are horrific farmers have worked with their own vet and the ministry to 'do the right thing'. Some farmers have volunteered that stock should be taken where dangerous contacts are obvious, even having to argue the case for slaughter. They would rather reduce the risk than feel responsible for the downfall of a neighbour. But now that five times as many farms are said to be slaughtered for being contiguous than for having FMD, the new contiguous cull disease has become a fearsome activity. Farmers are not clear whether it is vets who are making the decisions. The tale of the farm-stock slaughtered because of a

mistaken grid reference, one hundred miles of error, has been told and retold through every rural telephone exchange.

Farmers whose stock were slaughtered in the first few weeks of the crisis are now ready to restock and they are asking on what basis this will take place. One wife at the weekend had the idea that it was twenty one days. But twenty one days from when? Others believe three or six months, again from when? There is nothing really special about county boundaries in disease terms. Some farmers take the view everyone has to wait for the official end of the crisis in the UK, others that restocking will be allowed within so many miles from, or so many weeks since, a confirmed case. If you know the answer to the 'how long after' question please share your information because advance purchases may be able to be made now, even if the stock aren't moved for some time. The future can be developed ahead of the clearance date.

Local communities are counting the cost and impact and again it is the sheer potential volume of the contiguous culls which is the difficulty. Thirteen new cases yesterday. A good improvement from forty a short time ago. But those nine could generate from twenty to two hundred contiguous. There is local talk of one suspect farm being contiguous to forty others. But that has to be just the rural rumourmongers at work. Doesn't it?

In this county it is known that there are over one hundred and fifty infected farms and it is believed over one thousand contiguous farms to date. Around fifteen percent of the total farm units lost so far. It is becoming difficult for farmers to keep in mind that the battle is against the virus and not the control agencies.

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