

Here comes the matchstick man.

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‘What does he do if he finds muck on the end of his matchstick’ the farmer asked the vet. ‘Set fire to it’ was the curt reply from one of the other members of the clean up team.

Cost is taking over from disease as the dominant concern. As a rough calculation, on one farm, the compensation for the slaughtered herd will be £160,000. The clean up time taken with the people and machinery involved is estimated to be £80,000. If this is accurate then compensation plus a half could be a guide to the total. But some farms, with fewer expensive stock, may be more difficult to clean and it is not unreasonable to think that the clean up cost could be greater than the slaughter.

Farmers only see the effort that went into the pyres with sleepers, pallets, straw, kerosene etc. without concern for the economics. One farmer watched as an area of about four acres was cleared of topsoil. The on farm pyre was two hundred metres long by two sleepers wide. The pyre was built and lit within three days from slaughter. Twenty four hours later not a trace of anything could be seen. No bones or half burnt animals here. The ash was buried in a trench next to the pyre. All that remains is for the topsoil to be replaced but this has to be done by a different machine to the swing shovel that managed the animals. This is more than a job for the farm loader so a hefty implement is awaited.

After five weeks of washing, dismantling and disinfecting there is an estimated three weeks to go before the team of five plus the farmer complete their task. A local vet is the overseer and the team has worked hard and well. Then comes the inspection where it is believed that any organic material found on the end of a matchstick will mean a further clean up.

The concrete and walls have been washed down with citric acid and water and this has drained into the dirty water system which is pumped onto a grass field. Although the disinfectant will kill the foot and mouth virus it is hoped that the land will not be affected and grow grass for silage. Despite early reservations the farmer feels that he has a practical system in place, assisted by having a modern dairy unit with ‘easy’ to clean buildings and yards.

Modern premises are not the usual story. For many there has been little opportunity for investment in recent years and the rule, that the clean up should not improve the existing facilities, is difficult to work with. Wooden partitions and divisions are being taken out for burning and as yet the task of reconstruction has not started. There is concern that the final bill will not be met. As it is, compensation payments are still awaited nearly two months from culling day. Items like cubicle mats costs less to replace than to clean, even if they would pass inspection, but parlour mangers, where the infected cows were drooling, have cracks between the laminates and judged not cleanable. Items such as these are a greater practical and economic problem. It is assumed that the farmer will pay and claim back the cost. These details are yet to be sorted out.

Twenty one days after the matchstick man is satisfied it is understood that the task of restocking begins with the introduction of sentinel cattle. The sentinels will need access to all

buildings and areas where the original cattle inhabited. Details are awaited as to how they are supplied. It is assumed by farmers that these cattle will be laboratory tested and certified as clean. Not only clear of FMD, but they don't want to bring in other problems by having 'screws' wandering the farm. At the end of twenty eight days of sentinels further negative blood tests are expected to indicate that restocking can commence, provided the area is not under restriction.

For a dairy herd the farmer may wish to purchase in calf animals so that they calve on the farm and start their lactation within the system. These considerations are still some months away and there are emotional as well as practical considerations to be overcome. One farmer has indicated the difficulties he has now that other farmers have turned their cows out to grass. He sees their cows grazing in the spring sunshine and recalls that his are a pile of ash buried under a meadow. It is difficult for him to simply move on. He found a couple of plastic ear tags in the grass, lost by cows last grazing season and he recalls the cow by its number. How many calves she had and how many lactations, whether she milked well. Specific and general thoughts.

Many of the farmers who have been culled out will need considerable practical support in order to set about the task of restocking. There is a real danger that some of our best young farmers will decide not to simply try and rebuild. It is expected that the farmer close to retirement will gracefully depart the commercial livestock scene but younger farmers are a real potential loss. Stories about government disinterest in farming do not help and, together with the need for better trading conditions, are making some good and able farmers look to opportunities in other countries. For local veterinary practices the coming months will also reshape their future.

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