

Devil in the detail.

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What do I say to an 'eco-biologist working out of Seattle'? This is the question posed by my neighbour. Two years ago a Londoner and his American wife, living in America, stayed on a local farm while tracing their ancestral roots. They have been in contact with the farmer this week to get a first hand account of FMD. This came in the same post as an offer of 10,000 doses of vaccine from one of the minor parties. That was thrown in the bin but the letter to America is being carefully composed.

A major issue gaining ground locally concerns the spread of the disease from management of infected animals. One farmer records 'some of our infected animals were removed on the 16th day after slaughter. We had insisted on rendering as an alternative to the shorter period of disposal by fire. We did not want any risk that our infection might be spread to others. However, when they did go, we were shocked to learn that they were to be taken to be burnt at a neighbouring farm. The remainder went for rendering on day 18'.

A popular view is that infection was spread from pyres? A farmers wife observes that 'animals were burnt in a series of fires and we do know that the smoke from these fires swept in an arc through the parish and the farms covered have gone down with FMD. A neighbour working with his flock was enveloped in smoke and it was sweeping in a thick cloud over our sheep. An outbreak a few days before ours was in a small number of cattle in a closed shed, and again, after they had experienced a considerable amount of smoke 10 to 14 days earlier. A cousin noticed that when another pyre was lit the wind was gusting strongly and two weeks or so later there were cases downwind'.

It would be helpful if disease spread could be confirmed. Within a local community it applies unwanted pressure when it is said that farm A had the disease and then it spread to farms B to E up the valley. As access to the countryside opens up so farming families are coming into contact with people they haven't seen since the New Year. Inevitably the conversation is about FMD and its effects and all the notions that have been in the press and television are put to the farmer. Some farmers are meeting other farmers for the first time in many months and their experiences are being shared at greater length than previously on the telephone. This process will accelerate throughout the summer. Already individuals are finding that they have concerns in common with others. These are not necessarily the national or county issues but involve the significance of local events.

During the crisis has also been the time to submit Integrated Administration and Control System forms. One neighbour engages a form filler to complete the task. It appears that derogation was needed in order to graze set aside and that the categorisation of the farm for FMD needed to go on the form. The IACS officer advised that this categorisation would be available from the farmers vet. The vet was contacted and he in turn suggested that a helpful veterinary advisory would provide the up to date information over the 'phone, who the form filler rang and the job was completed. There had been some delays and frustrating 'phone calls before this simple system was identified, so the farmer decided to help other form fillers and advise the officer that the necessary information was available in the office one floor below his office, on the following extension. With much rolling of eyes and

agricultural shrugs the farmer delivers the finale that he was told that he should confirm the contact information by letter or fax.

A relatively minor issue in the greater scheme of things, but an aggravation to those involved, concerns making haylage for horses. A field adjoins a farm. The farm is under form D restriction. The contractor normally harvests the farm grass and the field and stores the total in the farm barn. He believes that this year he can harvest the grass but it cannot be taken from the field to the farm. Consequently the haylage will have to be stored in the field until restrictions are lifted. All hope that lifting occurs before the baler arrives.

The restricted area boundary has started to shrink and the other side of the road is now outside the infected area. This is causing some consternation for my neighbour whose land is now split between areas. Yesterday he had cows grazing opposite with licences to cross the road. But today the cows would cross into an uninfected area. From the management point of view it is easier if the farm is within or without. To have a change to part in and part out, immediately after cutting silage, plays havoc with the availability of grazing.

It would be encouraging to be able to tell Seattle that 'reports of our demise have been greatly exaggerated'. The devil, as always, is in the detail.

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