

Living in the zone

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The FMD restricted zone is expected to remain for 'several months', possibly until next spring. This is the shocking news being discussed by my neighbours.

The nearest neighbour has not had any AI or bull involvement with their dairy herd for five months. As there have been no new FMD cases within 10km for over three months, they, along with many others, were expecting to be outside the infected area from this week. The AI manager is due to call this evening to discuss possible arrangements. As we say 'summat has to be done'.

Store cattle can only be sold on to other farms within the zone, which is difficult if not impossible, or culled for welfare reasons. Stock have been kept and fed in the anticipation of being free to sell to their normal fatteners. They have been under a form D restriction for some of the time so they are waiting to hear whether they will receive any financial assistance for the months of limitation to their business. Details are anxiously awaited.

So what is the basis for prolonging the zone? It appears that where footpaths are important for tourist access the line can be redrawn provided there is no encroachment within 3 km or 10 km of an infected premise. The precise application is a little hazy. The county council is said to make a decision, not based on purely technical considerations but based on how easy it will be to change the area. Major boundaries, such as rivers or major roads are straightforward. They have difficulty with minor roads that weave around farms and pass through villages.

So it's flip a coin time. If your farm is near a catching feature you have a chance of having restrictions lifted. If you are in the depths of the countryside, where tourists rarely go there seems less interest to shrink the zone until the whole county is cleared. Some counties have put all footpaths off limits when they have not seen any FMD so the farming continues at the inconvenience of walkers. The local policy appears to maintain zones at the expense of farmers and for the inconvenience of the whole rural community.

The local grapevine has not reported any culling due to the surveillance programme in sheep. Maybe it's too early or maybe nothing has been found.

When the line does move, as happened a few weeks ago, each farmer is written to informing them that they can apply for an exemption so that a footpath through their farm remains closed. About 1500 farms were contacted and one third replied requesting that specific paths remain closed. The requests from approximately one in five were granted and red notices issued, signed by the county solicitor, threatening walkers with a £5000 fine. No requests for closure of roads through farmyards have been accepted even though if a path passes through a place where 'livestock are gathered', such as a farmyard, closure of the path is allowed.

Where is the technical accuracy in all this? Are the views of local vets accepted by councils as relevant to the path and vehicle bio-security of a farm? Individuals within the council are

well aware of the difficulties of their inaction. As one said 'the telephone rings constantly' and 'I do not find it easy when big tough men are in tears'.

So, accepting that we may be living in a world of infected zones and sub-clinical or un-noticed clinical disease, what can the individual farmer and his vet do to assure the authorities about bio-security? What are the activities of high risk and what are the activities of nil risk? Now may be the time to recognise an approved bio-secure farm, where the farm is able to engage inseminators and others in direct contact with the stock under bio-secure rules. This will allow some farms to carry on reasonably normally even though they are within an infected area.

The question is does the farmer and his vet have enough knowledge now, about the virus, to introduce effective bio-security? Can we eliminate the risk from vehicles passing by a field of cows and releasing virus from the air vents? There are after all no restrictions on vehicle movements passing infected premises or passing through infected areas but the stock could be kept a field away from any road if technically required.

Locally the drama group is putting on a play this week. No farmers, their wives or children are involved although, in the past, two or three would be either acting or shifting scenery. The vicar is doing the sound effects and he has noticed a drop off of farming families attending church services within the three parishes he serves. He has felt awkward about visiting them in case he puts their livelihood at risk and applies more stress rather than lightens the load.

Sympathy is expressed for one farmer who collapsed, said to be due to the stress of the crisis. His doctor referred him for an encephalogram and he has now had his driving license withdrawn. Virus 1. Farmer nil.

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