

Normal Service being resumed

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It has been a significant week. The infected area boundary has shifted to literally split a neighbour's farm in half. On one side of the lane the house and parlour is within the infected area together with three fields. The corn mill and machinery is outside the area along with the other fields. The rule seems to be that if part of the farm is in then it is all considered to be in. Inclusion is not related to precise distances from infected premises but to road boundaries.

At last the AI man can do his stuff. The first local cow has yet to be served but the inseminator is expected to be wearing a disposable mask. The gloves are to be discarded as usual and the boots and gown are to be cleaned and disinfected on farm. The car must not enter an area where the cows are or have been. There is some surprise that it has taken so long to reach this level of agreement on bio-security and that a disposable gown isn't part of the scheme. Farmers will just be thankful that normal service is being resumed.

Grass and weed topping in small fields is not being done and the thistles and stinging nettles are enjoying an unmolested summer. In the spring these patches were full of buttercups and smock but now it is all looking a little ragged. There are several houses that used to be small holdings that retain a few acres. Neighbouring farmers often mow them when they are passing back from cutting silage but this year everyone is staying on their own land. A telephone request led one dairying neighbour to explain that there is no way that he was going to enter a field where there had been sheep just to mow a few docks. These are not big issues but just break up the normal flow of management of the countryside.

With the rush of silage over local farmers are discussing the future with some surprising outcomes. One neighbour, who has taken the trouble to become organic, is planning to reduce the sheep as soon as he can find a buyer. While he is still within the infected area this will be difficult but he has taken up a supermarket scheme to grow chickens. This is taking into account that 'there are too many damned sheep' and also that a return of £600 per week is anticipated from the fowls. As he says if he can yield £25,000 this will be more than they have achieved for 'many years'. He further commented that 'many people wouldn't even get out of bed for what we are planning but farmers are expected to grub around for ten pound notes'.

The statements about farmers living on subsidies and changes in the direction of farming has been loudly trumpeted in the local press. This is all very new and no doubt the topic will be debated and developed for some time. To get an angle on the subsidy issue for family farms my neighbours tell me that they receive from £4500 to £15000 in direct subsidies. Commonly local dairy farms take up the small producer scheme where £90 per acre is received for 39 acres which doesn't involve set aside. A maximum of 90 bullocks yields £90 per head but few have the maximum and one 100 cow dairying neighbour, for example, is claiming for sixteen.

There are various schemes and options but it appears that although many family farmers are not receiving large sums what they do receive is an essential part of their income. For some farmers the FMD crisis has undermined their confidence in the future. It would be helpful if

the changes in direction for farming could be seen as a revival scheme for family farms. Much work needs to be done.

Grouse shooting is of minor interest here in Devon but it is interesting to note that this can go ahead within an infected area. The risk assessment takes the view that a shooting party will cause little more risk than walkers. Down here people have been excluded from infected areas including moorland. The shooting is said to yield £75 million to the economy which will be welcome but when garden fetes have been cancelled there clearly have been mixed messages. The whole topic, of the role of people with FMD, is confusing.

Restrictions on individual farms remain long after the disease has been dealt with within the protection zone of 3 km around an infected premise. The current testing procedures need all sheep within the zone to be cleared before individual farms are issued with their E form. Veterinary practices it appears cannot carry out private testing for farmers and cannot take samples and send them to an approved laboratory. Beyond protection zones lie surveillance zones. Further details are awaited.

For farmers who have not seen FMD or had the disease close by, living and working under protracted restrictions is a considerable mental burden. This may be obvious but now that it is over a month since a case was recorded in Devon a rapid return to normality is eagerly awaited.

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