

The People v Foot and Mouth.

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The official statement is that Devon is 'free of Foot and Mouth Disease'. The farm gates give a different message. *'Foot & Mouth is still about'* declares a handwritten note taped to a hazel branch. *'All visitors leave your car here and disinfect your feet'*. The farm is not visible at this point, being over the brow, but visitors who know will take adequate clothing because the weather is likely to change before you reach the farmhouse.

General advice to the public is not to walk on farmland. For some farms establishing ongoing bio-security is relatively easy in that the farmhouse and farm office is at the front of the farm and the stock buildings behind. But many farms are the other way around and the milking parlour and winter housing are approached before the house. Locally public roads typically pass through the farm buildings and the road forms part of the farm for stock gathering.

The role of people and vehicles is still not clear. Somehow the risks to the stock of social contact with the farmers family have to be assessed. The dangerous contact concept, where people have handled stock on one farm and are then moving to another, is well understood. Similarly vehicles driving over dung at one farm can be seen to present a risk to another farm. But where is the risk with a social visit from someone who has simply stepped into their car, driven ten miles and stepped out again? In times of crisis a blanket coverall applies. The social consequences of the perception of risk has expanded the harm from FMD. Farmers need to know how to treat people in the future. When control of the disease has been completed maybe the specialists can accurately assess virus spread and advise on practical ways forward for people.

The official figures indicate that over seven thousand farms have been culled out for reasons other than clinical disease. There is much talk about enquiries. It is the escalation of the culling that worries many farmers.

At the county show there was a tea party for those farmers who had taken legal action to resist the culling. To be precise a firm of solicitors invited clients to meet the team that had advised them. Sometimes a fax or phone call had been enough contact and face to face meetings had not taken place. Some farmers had barricaded themselves into their farms refusing to allow anyone in and any visits were conducted over the barriers.

The reasons for the non clinical culling appear to have been open to local interpretation. In the heat of battle, when the disease was developing daily, rapid decisions about culling neighbours to infected stock were taken. Definitions of what was a real risk were swamped by the notion of being contiguous. This is the area that farmers would wish to see assessed in detail and lessons learned. Samples were taken from some farms. How many of the non-clinical culls were subsequently found to be harbouring the virus?

For many farmers locally the heated debate nationally about vaccination versus slaughter is a side issue. If the policy is to slaughter, fair enough. If the policy is to vaccinate, fair enough. If the policy is to vaccinate to control and then slaughter, fair enough. But if some official can decide the future of a farm by indicating the possibility of future disease, because of a

boundary, then much much more information is required. And furthermore if that decision can be changed by an aggressive solicitor then confidence in the science behind the policy is lost.

The positive detection of antibodies, since the county all clear, has been widely publicised. All the pundits say that this is to be expected and not to worry. Faith in such assurances run a little thin in todays anxious climate. Farmers need to know what does sero-positive really mean. Has the animal had the disease and it went undiagnosed? Has the animal had a touch of the virus and is now effectively vaccinated? Are all animals that have been in contact with the sero-positive animal likely to have been 'infected'? Does this mean more culling?

Back along I mentioned a farmer who had a single sero-positive but the individual animal could not be identified. He agreed for his flock to be slaughtered, just in case. Would he make the same decision today if one beast was positive? Not if the finances were against him.

There is one technical aspect that is mentioned time and again and is believed by many farmers to be a contributing factor to the spread of this disease. Farms had FMD diagnosed. They and contiguous farms were culled out. Pyres were constructed and lit. Farms downwind of the pyres were engulfed in smoke and there are reports of the stock and people living and working in a stinking cloud. The downwind farms then developed FMD. Have pyres spread the disease?

It would be encouraging to say that FMD is all over bar the shouting. Unfortunately it is not all over and the shouting may only just be beginning.

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