

Bring on the third umpire.

The situation is not uncommon. Clients express concern to their vet about a possible breakdown in bio-security and the re-introduction of FMD. The vet takes on the mantle of finding out exactly what is going on. He makes whatever contact is available to him. After several contacts he becomes increasingly frustrated and concerned. He is told that a risk assessment has been carried out but a copy or even the content of that assessment cannot be made available to him. With increasing angst he contacts a wider circle including his own professional body. The best response he can get is that the matter will be looked into.

What are we talking about? The shipping of transporter loads of sheep for slaughter from Cumbria to Cornwall. The suspicion, voiced by those on the ground, is that the needs of the supermarket outweigh the control of the disease. Are these concerns fair? Are they off the wall? Have all the angles been considered? Is there no risk from these animals as they pass through eight counties? The job will have been completed before most of the questions, let alone the answers, have been sorted out.

The third umpire has not been available throughout. At a national gathering this week, to review rural stress, many questions were posed by the guest speaker. Although well intentioned there are clearly several layers of information and while one group has access to one level the full picture has not been compiled. Many of the social effects are separated from the technical. The social impact of technical policy is the subject for yet another conference at some time.

It is sobering to read an accurate account of FMD and its effect on an individual farm. The following summary gives a flavour of the anxiety.

They became aware of the first case in Devon, at church, on the Sunday following the national publicity. Later that day they spread straw in the entrance to the farm and soaked it in Jeyes fluid. The following day they tried to buy an approved disinfectant but stocks were only available later that evening to the first one hundred farms on the waiting list. Three days later disinfectant became available.

On the day that FMD was announced on the national news in the evening they bought two sheep at market, which meant a form D restriction. They met the 'MAFF official' at the top of the lane and came back with instructions and laminated notices. Deliveries and post to be left at the end of the lane. All vehicles to have wheels and wheel arches sprayed and journeys kept to a minimum.

They telephoned their neighbours to warn them about the notices so that they 'wouldn't become alarmed'. The Womens World Day of Prayer on the Friday was cancelled along with Sunday services. A letter from the parish council advised that all public rights of way are closed, except in towns. Dartmoor National Park closed. A neighbour had a severe stroke.

No-one came to the farm on the next day. Relations with MAFF resumed the following morning. As well as buying two ewes, two barren ewes were sold at market a week earlier and purchased by a farm that has contracted FMD. Severe frost and a veterinary examination of the stock thankfully revealed no signs of the disease. The box at the lane end began working both ways with a list for the parish newsletter collected by a neighbour and feed blocks delivered there for the sheep. Also in the box was a cake, biscuits and Maltesers. The local stock hauliers asked their men to take a weeks holiday as they are losing money.

One of the ewes with a lamb has broken out onto the road. A 60th birthday party for a neighbour cancelled along with Womens Institute meetings. Seventeen cases confirmed in Devon. A neighbour telephones to say that stock that have been sold for slaughter have received very low prices even though supermarket prices have gone up. The vicar rang to offer his support. The police meet the school bus at the top of the lane. Went to a childrens event in the village, the first time out for three weeks and scurried home so as not to meet many people.

Someone heaped up the disinfected straw. A great joke no doubt. More farms encircling with the disease confirmed. Snowing heavily and worries about the ewes with young lambs. Contacted a neighbour by telephone and found him very despondent. He has stopped picking up dead lambs from the mud there are so many. Our form D notice is lifted. Went to do some shopping, buy a bigger disinfectant sprayer and have a haircut.

The vet came to inspect details of our request to move ewes and lambs across the road by link box. We attended Mothering Sunday and all the children gave bunches of Daffodils to their mothers. We hear of the death of a neighbour which puts FMD in perspective. The movement licence came through a week after the inspection and fourteen journeys with the link box were needed. The sheep are not doing well despite the money being spent and we are getting very short of hay. The bullocks and many of the sheep should have been sold but instead they are eating next winters feed.

A bunch of flowers was left in the box by WI members. One ewe has a greenish mess under her top lip and a scald like blister. The vet is on his way.

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