

## **Touching wood**

The last case in Devon was on June 17<sup>th</sup>. There was a flurry of activity on the Somerset border around the same time and since then nothing. The news, that a new farm in the county has had the sheep slaughtered and is awaiting laboratory findings, is causing a bit of a shiver.

A manager of an upmarket tourist attraction confides that 'the microbiologists' do not know how to 'get rid of it'. Premises within his responsibility lost several hundred thousand pounds while people were afraid to travel and walk on grass. The last couple of months have seen a return to normality and he is disturbed to consider that the county will again be blighted. 'What can we do' he asks of no-one in particular. 'All I can do is this' he said, as he touched the nearest table.

It is perhaps worth considering how complete counties are blighted from a local outbreak. The suggestion that parishes will be considered as movement zones in the future could have considerable wider benefits. If the sheep are found to be infected, has bio-security improved since the spring for any problems to be considered more local? Can the local nature of an outbreak be recorded rather than a county wide nomination? Some comfort is being taken from the information that the cattle on the same farm are not known to be implicated. If this is so is it a triumph for good practice and have the sheep and the cattle been kept separately as advised? Has good bio-security been implemented by the farmer? If so then successful bio-security should be shouted about. Some good news to come out of potential disaster.

The implications for FMD are that it spread from animal to animal and farm to farm in a relatively open way for some weeks or months before eradication programmes were able to have any effect. Now, however, many farms are without stock and are unable to assist in spreading the virus. Many have been sanitised. Logically any new introduction of virus or flare up of disease should be contained. Spread ought to be minimised even without improved disinfection and vehicle cleanliness. Counties that have suffered the ravages of the virus should now be better equipped to halt disease spread.

What can be expected if the sheep are found to be positive? People afraid to travel, to visit, to gather together, to walk? Total despondency that we will face a winter of isolation and stress? Bankruptcy and depression? No, none of these things. We should expect a rapid professional response from the farmers and vets. We should expect the full force of the knowledge gained this year to be accurately and immediately applied and the problem limited to a very small area. The public should be assured that the disease control agencies have honed their skills and are on the ball. Containment is rapid and successful.

Various instructions are floating around about the movement of stock which will need advice and interpretation for many. Although the vet is not totally involved I suspect many practices will be asked to advise. The vet of course can do little about the actual administrative procedure but a great deal of hand holding can be anticipated. Not least because there are threats about welfare issues this winter. Prosecutions are highlighted 'if preventable welfare cases' occur this winter and next spring. Planning where to place the animals and the food

for them will not be an easy task for many farmers. Silage is still being taken on some local farms in the hope that empty bellies can be prevented. The situations that arose from February through April this year caught everyone ill prepared with lambs in open fields on congested mud.

Farms that were culled out, but not yet signed off as clean, cannot sell wrapped fodder harvested this year. Soon it is hoped that these supplies will become available for those farmers who had their own activities disrupted due to various restrictions at critical times. Near neighbours will have weathered the difficulties in different ways and many alternative situations, some beneficial, some of concern, are now presented. It is not clear how far these bales can travel. Presumably only within the 'at risk' area.

Back in the early months, that added grey hairs to many, much was made of the stress endured by the officials involved. The perception was sometimes given that individuals had not 'signed up' for careers in pyre construction, on-farm counselling and being the visible front for anguish and depression. Let us hope that their experience has been transferred to those that make up the current structure and that old difficulties will never be repeated. Hopefully, we can be more positive than just touching wood.

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