

Fit to Farm

It will be of no surprise for those who have direct contact with local farmers to recognise that the FMD saga has changed the very nature of farming. The way that livestock farmers view their own activities has changed. Prices are down, profitability is difficult and at every turn someone is demanding a piece of paper. The family farm has seen more officials this spring and summer than they would wish and in many cases this includes the veterinary profession.

It may be that the authorities are now trying to lighten the mood somewhat, but the same missif has engendered a dismissive blue response from my neighbour and outright laughter from his wife and farming son. The cause of this outpouring of emotion is the newsletter explaining that there are over one hundred government forms relevant to Foot and Mouth Disease. This is not a joke and there are no formal predictions as to the amount that will be required to be completed before the disease is eradicated. The most 'popular' are FM2, FM7, FM30, FM31, FM37, FM37A, FM37B and FM38.

To clarify FM30 is known as Form A (infected premise), FM31 is Form B (withdrawing Form A), FM37 is Form D (restricted premise), FM37A is a modified Form D (restrictions as in Form A), FM37B applies to FM30 premises with dangerous contacts and/or contiguity and FM38 is Form E (withdrawal of Form D). I'm sure there is a mandarin who can explain this to Ministers at the drop of a hat. Humphrey Appleby step forward.

Almost by the same rural post came the introduction of the Rural Payments Agency. The mission statement is clear 'To be a customer focused organisation that pays valid Common Agricultural Policy claims accurately and on time'. The information further reveals that the RPA is a 'Next Steps Executive Agency' of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This is fantastic stuff. Payment when you expect it and the amount you are anticipating. The new agency is now launched but the downside is that it will not be until 2004 that the 'proposed new systems are in place'.

It is essential that within the new rural order payments are received but the extent of the current schemes is most revealing. A quick scan shows eleven scheme categories and over seventy schemes. Farmers are now playing the game of Which. Which one haven't I heard of and which ones can I apply for that I don't at the moment. Of course some are only available to manufacturers and traders and not farmers, like the production refund on sugar used in the chemical industry and whisky refunds. In amongst the melee are old favourites including the Over Thirty Month Scheme and the Livestock Welfare (Disposal) Scheme.

Other agencies are also considering the needs of the farming community for the future. Much has been made about the various initiatives to secure a future for farming. Fundamentally, however, the sheer number of counselling calls answered by all the stress agencies and the records of distress and consternation have stimulated questions about the important aspects, the really vital aspects, of farming for the 21st Century. Overriding all others is the health of the farmer and his family. If health is impaired all other activities both business and social are put at risk.

Step forward NHS Plus, an occupational health service for farmers, vets and all involved in rural businesses. Consultants are poised, nurses are being trained in rural phraseology and beds are being made up. As with industry the recognition of work related ill health and a reduction in days lost will be the means of assessment. Targets have been set to reduce the number of days off work by 30% before 2010 and by half that by 2004. This will be done. It's easy because no-one has any clear idea of the starting point. Clearly though, if such a service is to be seen to be successful it must be started at a time of high ill health. Therefore, if the stresses and strains of 2001 are not repeated, success is guaranteed.

Best of all, such a service is outside the legal framework of the NHS and cannot be provided free. So, get ready to allocate a goodly percentage of the practice budget to occupational health. Will it become compulsory? Who knows? The power lady from Whitehall was not prepared to answer in depth questions but the farming response at the presentation can only be described as gobsmacked. Of course if all farms were big businesses how much easier it would all be to understand their motivation and ambitions!

You do have to be fit to farm, physically, emotionally and financially. How else can people work their way through FMD version two, the continuing story of trials in the face of adversity.

In the meantime members of family farms will continue to try and do at fifty five what they did when twenty five and vets will try to prevent disease problems so that they don't have to spend too much time in drafty byres with buckets of lukewarm water.

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