

## **The return of faecal mud.**

It is interesting to note that farmers are advised that higher standards of bio-security will apply at collection centres. If you leave your vehicle you must wear waterproof clothing so that you can be fully cleansed and disinfected before getting back in. I don't think anyone will now be turning up with five sheep in a trailer towed behind the light beige seated Rover.

What exactly is the purpose behind the bio-security measures and are there still more improvements to be introduced? It is too easy to say that the purpose is to get rid of the virus. With most infections there is a contact time needed before the disinfectant ruptures the virus. Is this microseconds, seconds or minutes? Should the farmers wear plastic head covers, the sort of thing that the Duke of Edinburgh refused to wear when he visited a cheese factory? Are their heads, or rather is their hair a premium source of viral spread?

Before entering an area where there are other peoples sheep or cattle should existing clothes be covered up? Should farmers have a supply of coveralls to be worn off their farm? Should all footwear be limited to on farm and off farm use or should plastic footcovers be worn at all times away from the farm?

There are probably many other considerations for effective bio-security but if this thing is to be done then it needs to be done properly. However, the reality is that bio-security has all but returned to days of yore. Farmers wear jeans, shirts and fleeces for chilly days with a favourite pair of boots or wellies. Wet activities may involve an apron or coverall but generally the stock are handled and the tractor driven in the same clothes. Does the virus survive a quick whisk around the washing machine with Persil or whatever?

The inference is that somewhere out there are sheep with subclinical or undetected clinical infection. Over four thousand Devon flocks have now been blood tested and when asked many farmers volunteered groups of beasts that had been overlooked. There is a determination to be rid of the threat of FMD and move on. The official county classification is 'at risk' and 'high risk' for sheep.

One of the matters to come out of our local inquiry is the hint that farmers could have had roads closed if disease control required it. This came as news to the farmers who had tried and it appears that discussions were needed with the council and not with the police or the ministry. More detail will follow but this could be very important for many Devon farms with roads as part of animal collection areas. If the vet could apply for the road to be closed as a bio-security measure, be it for a few hours or days, high risk occasions could be minimised.

The greatest inconvenience remains the movement licences and farmers have been asked not to take out their exasperation on the officials. It is only a rumour that a local artist is making hazel twig figures of a man at a desk so that farmers can beat the figure with a stick before making the 'phone call. It is only of partial relief to be told that the individuals are 'not personally responsible for any problems'. It has not been easy to recruit twenty extra staff to County Hall and they only have a six month contract. As the newsletter points out 'if staff leave due to the abuse they have suffered over the phone, this will lead to further delays'.

Maybe if there was a competitor service the same approach could be taken as other telephone support services. Give the customer the run around the telephone circuit for an hour hoping that he tires and goes elsewhere.

There is a temporary blip and the three different computer databases for animal movements are not interacting. Farmers are urged to have a clearly marked map of origin and destination, faxed by the vet, to link in to the signed form.. It will be interesting to consider how detailed our knowledge will be as to animal movements within and between farms. Blue and green arrows all over the map. Blood testing is a delaying factor and this will presumably continue throughout the autumn.

Farms themselves have now returned to having vehicle deliveries to the farmyard. Straw mats are a thing of memory although there are a few limp pieces of carpet on the lane that passes through my neighbours yard. The postman now drops off the letters on the kitchen table, children come to play and local people no longer feel guilty if they drop in for a chat. Tractors are passing from the stock collecting yards to the fields via the roads and faecal mud is a part of the rural car again. The countryside is beginning to smell like a normal autumn.

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26<sup>th</sup> October 2001