

Inventing the future

'If you do not change direction there is a danger that you will continue on the same path'. This is one of the many sayings that support the notion that Foot & Mouth Disease may turn out to have benefits as well as sadness. The system that encouraged over one million, and possibly as many as two million, sheep movements in three weeks last February is seen as a corrupt system and not a path to continue to be followed.

There would have been around forty million sheep on the land at the time of the first case and it is stated that the disease was circulating for three weeks prior to detection. If a mean figure of one and a half million sheep movements is agreed then a breakdown of how many sheep would be helpful. At ten sheep per movement we have fifteen million in three weeks. At twenty per movement a total of thirty million sheep on the move. In addition to the numbers, whether these sheep were moved by farmers or traders is important for future direction. The example is offered of the ewe, detected with FMD at a slaughterhouse in Wiltshire, that had travelled from a Northumberland farm to a Cumbrian market to a Devon holding to the Wiltshire abattoir. Someone will know the full details but it looks as though there were two dealer movements and one farmer movement.

The ratio of dealer to farmer movements appears very important if the policy, of restricting movements, is to have long term benefits that outweigh the disadvantages. At present farmers are complaining that they are unable to move the sheep off their premises in time to make way for the next crop of livestock or greenery. Can a policy direction be found that limits dealer movements and sheep journeys without inhibiting agricultural good practice?

One of the factors that increased the delay in slaughtering infected beasts was the slowness of stock valuation. It is said that the purpose of the new Animal Health Bill is to make sure that valuations take place within twenty four hours. This may be one way to tackle the problem but farmers are pointing out that an ongoing valuation figure for commercial stock would be acceptable. A monthly assessment of valuation could be produced and published and that figure, for the different stock, taken at the time of the outbreak. No need for individual farm assessment. For pedigree animals the stock records will be available and can be valued equally well after slaughter as before. A small task for an agri-economics unit.

There is another saying that has been quoted this week that 'a problem when looked at in more detail always becomes more complicated'. One of the casualties of FMD is said to be the reputation of 'agricultural scientists'. Just who is included in this broad dismissal is not clearly identified but as the proposal was put by an agricultural scientist there appears to be a fair degree of self flagellation going on. Even with the added power of hindsight it is still not clear exactly what factors need to be changed to close the book on FMD and open up good prospects for future disease control.

It is further said that the UK has become the 'dustbin for meat and meat products from abroad'. Evocative headline catching stuff, as you would expect from a European politician, producing images of search and seize troops on the borders. The notion that all foreign food goods are suspect and that home production is whiter than driven snow is easy to say but

difficult to substantiate. Particularly when the closure of small abattoirs is identified as part of the nations ills and the need for shorter journey times and slaughter closer to production is being highlighted for disease control as well as welfare.

Bring on then the little red tractor symbol to rescue us from the mire of uncertainty. This icon encompass all that is good and wholesome about British Farms Standards. Set the British standard for British home consumption. However it is the standard that rules, not the place of production. Therefore the whole world can sell into Britain provided they meet and comply with the Red Tractor. This is actually quite cunning because the costs of meeting the standard will rest with the place of production. If the cost of monitoring compliance, with vet visits for welfare and good practice, was equally transferred then visits by home produced British vets to far away locations would be obligatory. All overseas producers would be trained on British farms with veterinary input. The countryside becomes one huge training ground.

The alternative is to spread around the current subsidies from the Common Agricultural Policy to shift from product to environmental management. One of the snags is the estimated 20-30% of the available budget that would be spent on compliance, which reduces the appeal somewhat. Where is the trust of yesteryear? Gone with the double counting of sheep.

These topics and many more were presented at the Rural Forum with the Federation of Young Farmers Clubs. The panel included a splendid array of notables and the forward optimism was most uplifting. As a guest of the chairman I was privileged to listen, discuss and chat with those who are inventing the rural future that they intend to manage.

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