

## **Blowing in the wind**

A rather important observation was made recently. It appears that none of the farms that were successful in legally opposing the contiguous cull subsequently had stock which caught the virus. How many successfully opposed the cull is uncertain but there were several in Devon and elsewhere. Whether some challenges to the cull were not legally correct and overruled is also not easily identified. The truth about viro-legal opposition and infection is probably best obtained from veterinary practices. If you have clients that took legal action, prevented the culling and then Foot & Mouth Disease was detected in sheep or cattle, it would be worthwhile to highlight the fact.

Assuming the strongly stated observation to be correct, it really is thinking cap time. It is believed that when contiguous stock do not have the disease, by observation or blood test, the culling policy is considered to be successful because the control has advanced ahead of the travelling virus. Therefore, one hundred percent negative contiguous animals is the ultimate target. Death stops the collection of any further data however. Where the virus moves on to infect neighbouring stock it is assumed that the culling policy was not acted upon quickly enough and the virus travelled ahead of the controls.

The culling resistors have unintentionally provided a trial group. Their stock was considered to be at risk but they applied a local assessment based on wood, river, road, arable land and other barriers and decided, from a point of view ranging from technical awareness to bloody mindedness, to prevent the cull. Whatever their thought processes, from emotional to scientific, it is an important consideration if their actions did not lead to infection. Ministerial pronouncements indicated that the resistors had allowed the disease to spread and this appears to be one basis for revisions to the Animal Health Bill currently under discussion.

So what else did they do that could account for the absence of disease? There was talk of barricades and refusing to allow the 'men from the Ministry' to enter the farm. All visitors were repelled and in fact they treated the farm as though it was an infected premise. Tighter security perhaps even than an infected premise because there was no movement, animal or human. No contractors and possibly no vets. They took bio-security very seriously indeed. Is it this attention to bio-security that was the critical factor? Would greater attention to bio-security by all have meant that only infected premises would need to have had stock culled? But factors other than human and animal are believed to allow the virus to travel between farms?

This leads us to wind direction. It has again been inferred that farms upwind from infected premises were found to have infected stock. This should not be a surprise if dangerous contacts were likely. It is also a consideration that some farms downwind escaped the virus. At the Devon Inquiry much was made of the smoke, ash and hair from pyres blowing across downwind stock. Even if the virus could be spread from a pyre the beasts being burnt were not necessarily infected. The pyre may have contained only non-infected contiguous animals, or did they all go to furnaces? Even as close to the recent problems as we are today much of the fine detail is being lost. Relying on memory will make any deductions pitifully inaccurate before long.

The role of the wind and the virus is a very important aspect which has all sorts of considerations for future policy. In the past much was made of the plumes of virus from piggeries carried for miles. For this outbreak, with much of the cattle and sheep stock outdoors, the notion persists of a ground hugging virus travelling the length of a small field.

Using the air, but not related to the wind, is the inferred role of jackdaws. Farmers report seeing 'drunken' jackdaws staggering about their fields, believed to be suffering from the effects of the sedatives given to culled stock. The disinfectant liberally sprayed around did not deter scavenging. There are concerns that if the birds have fed on infected beasts they may be able to spread the virus by beak and foot. This spread could be directly by pecking livestock or indirectly by contamination. Certainly a jackdaw shoot is likely to be undertaken by some in the event of further threats to bio-security.

But, next time, hopefully a generation or two away, what sort of conditions will apply? Will the rewriting of the master plan after 2001 offer sufficient viral control if the animals are in winter housing? Would a December peak offer uncertain logistics if determined by the experiences of a March problem?

May good luck and clear thought be bestowed on all those engaged in formulating future disease control strategies.

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