



The Centre For Business Relationships,
Accountability, Sustainability and Society

Comment and Analysis

Foot & Mouth Disease

A summary of media coverage on the
tenth anniversary of 2001 outbreak



Delyth Crimes



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Foot and Mouth Disease – A summary of media coverage on the tenth anniversary of 2001 outbreak

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Coverage of the 10th anniversary of the 2001 UK Foot & Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak in the media will have brought up some unpleasant memories for a great deal of those who were affected either directly or indirectly by the disease.

On Sunday 6th February 2011 Countryfile, the BBC's rural affairs programme covered an anniversary ceremony at the 'Watchtree' nature reserve, a site in Great Orton, Cumbria which was a mass burial site for half a million cattle and sheep that were slaughtered in the FMD outbreak in 2001.

Nearly a thousand farmers were affected by the outbreak in Cumbria and one was interviewed regarding his experience and how the outbreak had affected his business at the time and how the business had changed since. All those interviewed seemed to have been affected by the disease, however the programme didn't allow any real emotion to be shown from those that were interviewed, emotion which has been documented on many occasions through research and the media.

Major Alex Birtwistle, the army officer overseeing operations in Great Orton during that period mentioned that it was 'a harrowing time for all' back in 2001. This is the closest account to the events of 2001 that was exposed in the programme which also seemed to be deficient in the degree of social consequences.

Major Birtwistle also talked about lessons learnt and to 'firstly get the science right from the start and secondly, get on with the task (of culling and eradication) quickly and thirdly to anticipate that it will come back one day in some form or another'. This would imply that anyone involved in an incident such as this at some point in the future should be prepared with an emergency eradication plan already in place.

In a BBC Countryfile episode screened on Sunday 13th February, it is asking if lessons were learnt from 2001 and how things could have been done differently. A fictional outbreak of FMD on a farm was set up with events showing an interpretation of the Government's current contingency plans. It was reported as a 'blueprint' of what events could happen by using Defra's current FMD contingency plan, however, in realistic terms it is very unusual this scenario will happen according to plan. Defra's Chief Vet was interviewed about what plans have been put in place for dealing with another FMD outbreak in the UK and what has changed since 2001, such as improved tracings of livestock to detect disease source and an immediate movement ban for all animals. Alongside this, the turnaround time in test results will be quicker, however it still means a complete culling policy for any infected holding. A farmer interviewed didn't seem to have much confidence on Defra's ability to handle another outbreak much differently than 2001.

It seems that the handling of the outbreak in Surrey in 2007 which was contained quickly to prevent disease spread has been forgotten. The question arises on whether Government needs to communicate their contingency plans more clearly to reassure farmers there are adequate procedures in place. The scientific view from an interview

with Professor Hugh Pennington is saying that if all the correct systems are in place, there should never be another 'situation' as the 2001 outbreak again.

There is still an underlying concern that the disease will return again with reports in a Devon newspaper only last month which mentioned that the FMD outbreak in Turkey had already broken through EU borders into Bulgaria. It also mentioned an outbreak in South Korea which is on a much larger scale than the European one, but didn't imply that it was an immediate threat to the UK. However, it does imply that the UK 2001 outbreak did occur after a sequence of outbreaks across the world similar in pattern as is being seen now.

The article in the Devon newspaper outlines a seemingly greater confidence in the ability of the UK's veterinary authorities to have better control of the disease if an outbreak occurs with a new contingency plan and also animal movement restrictions which would reduce the speed of the disease spreading. The article ends with the different handling strategies of the disease currently in the affected countries and the issues that arise when using a vaccination. This highlights concerns over the EU's contingency planning of imported disease outbreaks and asks the question whether UK authorities (Defra) should go it alone with their own strategy on the prevention of imported disease with, for example disinfecting those travelling from affected countries.

The Welsh rural affairs programme, 'Ffermio' televised and hour long episode dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the FMD outbreak in Wales on 14th February 2011, particularly covering the onset of the disease in Wales found in Anglesey and the pattern of spread across Wales. The programme interviewed Carwyn Jones AM, and currently First Minister, who was the politician who had responsibility for rural affairs within the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) at that time. He felt that farmers and other people were depending on him to make the correct decisions for them and for the Welsh countryside which was a huge challenge and made a point of saying that he realised that farmers didn't have a choice when it came to the implications of FMD compared to people such as himself who lived in towns.

Ffermio also interviewed personnel from the Farming Unions in Wales whose involvement included high level negotiations directly with the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street regarding compensation and so forth, which highlighted the importance of the situation for everyone involved. The vet who first discovered the disease on a farm in Anglesey also gave his account of the point in time when he realised what he had found and the full implications of what he had discovered on not just that particular farm, but also on the entire rural industry.

Ffermio's presenter had empathy with those farmers being interviewed, primarily as she had also been a broadcaster during the outbreak in 2001 and spoke to some of the affected farmers with whom she had interviewed ten years before, and was able therefore to show what seemed to come across as added compassion. The programme's ability to highlight the 'underlying emotional scar' of the effects of the disease on the individuals interviewed came across in a much better format than the BBC's attempt, and therefore shows how poignant people's memories are of the events even after ten years.