

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

28 February 2001
093/01

RODGERS LAUNCHES ACTION PLAN FOLLOWING CLINICAL TESTS FOR FMD ON SOUTH ARMAGH FARM

"I want to take this opportunity to update the media on the current position in Northern Ireland in relation to Foot and Mouth Disease.

As I indicated when I spoke to you at lunch time we have been carrying out investigations on a farm at Meigh in South Armagh to which we had reason to believe that sheep which had been sourced in a market at Carlisle had been brought. The sheep were imported on 19 February which was before the ban on imports from Great Britain was imposed. It had been known that animals from farms infected with Foot and Mouth Disease had passed through Carlisle market.

Department veterinarians have been on the farm all day today checking the animals. Samples have been taken and will be sent to the laboratory at Pirbright. Slaughter of all the animals has now commenced and the carcasses will be incinerated. Slaughter will be carried out by lethal injection. Tracing of other contact animals has also commenced. I can confirm that on examination at slaughter, some of the sheep presented symptoms which are consistent with Foot and Mouth Disease. I have to tell you that it is now my belief that we are looking at an outbreak of this disease in Northern Ireland. However, as I indicated earlier, we will have to await confirmation from Pirbright.

Because of this deterioration in the situation we will now be carrying out immediate surveillance on neighbouring farms. However, as yet, no decision has been taken to slaughter any animals other than those on the farm in question.

I have advised Executive colleagues and the Chairman of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee of the current situation. The Department has been in touch with the Departments in London and Dublin and I have spoken to Joe Walsh.

I also have to tell you that we are viewing with concern a sheep which was delivered today to the Veterinary Laboratory in Omagh. This sheep which is from a farm in the Castlederg area presented symptoms suggestive of Foot and Mouth Disease. We are sending samples from that animal to Pirbright tonight as well. However a clinical examination on the farm has indicated no sign of any other symptoms.

We had reports that several animals in a processing plant were showing signs suggestive of Foot and Mouth Disease and the plant volunteered to close. However, following a detailed examination of the herd Department Vets have informed me that this is a "cold" suspect as there are no signs of the disease in any of the animals.

In light of developments in south Armagh and, as I also indicated earlier today, I will now be introducing further measures to help prevent further introduction of the disease and to contain the current outbreak, if indeed that is confirmed. These are as follows:

- a ban on the movement of susceptible animals (ie, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and deer) other than for slaughter, until further notice;
- a ban on farm-to-farm collection of animals for slaughter, until further notice
- a formal ban on the holding of livestock auctions and markets until further notice;
- a ban on the movement of horses to, from or within Northern Ireland for a period of at least 3 weeks;
- an extension of the temporary closure of the DARD Agricultural Colleges until further notice. However we are looking at alternative ways of delivering the courses.
- a tightening of our controls on the production of pig swill;
- a reduction of our testing of cattle for tuberculosis and brucellosis to the minimum;
- advice to the organisers of large events and gatherings to postpone such events for the time being;
- advice to members of the public not to visit the countryside unnecessarily until further notice; an increase in our controls on the export of the relevant animals and products to other Member States, especially to the Republic of Ireland.

I will be reviewing the adequacy of all these measures on a daily basis and will add to them or lift them as appropriate.

I regret the need for these steps and would again ask for everyone's continued co-operation in dealing with this potentially very serious situation.

I appreciate the responsible attitude which members of the public and the farming community have shown since this emergency began. I want to re-emphasise the need for vigilance and for the concept of fortress farms. I

would again strongly advise against any gatherings of farmers or of people on farms. I would again ask the public to keep away from farms and farmland except where it is vital for the delivery of essential services. Organisers of sporting events should consider whether it is really necessary for them to go ahead. If they are in doubt, they should seek my Department's advice through the use of the help lines.

I also want to say that I appreciate the interest of the media in this subject and their anxiety to keep the public informed. I want to help you as much as I can to achieve this objective. However you too have a major responsibility as regards observing the precautions I have outlined above.

I know that some of these precautions are going to be inconvenient. However it is imperative that everybody does everything possible to prevent the introduction and spread of this disease. I know that great hardship is being caused for farmers and that collection of milk supplies is becoming extremely difficult".

ENDS

Foot and mouth disease – Frequently Asked Questions

The nature of the disease

Q What is it?

It is a highly infectious viral disease in which fever is followed by the development of vesicles or blisters - chiefly in the mouth or on the feet. There are 7 main types of virus, which produce similar symptoms and which can only be differentiated in the laboratory.

Q How is it spread?

Foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) is a highly infectious disease that can spread by direct or indirect contact with infected animals. Infected animals begin by excreting the virus a few days before signs of the disease develop. Pigs in particular produce large numbers of virus particles.

Airborne spread of the disease takes place readily. The prevailing meteorological conditions and local topography determine the distance that the disease can travel and this may be considerable. For example, circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that the outbreak on the Isle of White in 1981 resulted from the airborne spread of the virus from Brittany in northern France.

Cattle trucks, lorries, market places, and loading ramps - where infected animals may have been present - are sources of infection until effectively disinfected. Roads may also become contaminated, and virus may be picked up and carried on the wheels of passing vehicles such as delivery lorries, milk tankers etc.

Any person who has attended diseased animals can spread the disease; and dogs, cats, poultry, wild game and vermin may also carry infected material.

The disease is also spread mechanically by the movement of animals, persons, vehicles and other things, which have been contaminated by the virus.

Meat from the carcase of animals infected with FMD at the time of slaughter can transmit the virus. In the past outbreaks of the disease have been linked with the importation of infected meat and meat products.

Q Can people contract the disease?

Advice from the Department of Health is that it is very rare. There has only been one recorded case of FMD in a human being in Great Britain in 1966. The general effects of the disease in that case were similar to influenza with some blisters. It is a mild short lived, self-limiting disease. The Food Standards Agency has advised that the disease has no implications for the human food chain.

Q Which animals are susceptible?

Cattle, sheep, pigs and goats are susceptible and some wild animal such as hedgehogs, coypu, rats, deer and zoo animals including elephants.

When animals recover from infection by one type of virus they have little or no protection against attacks by any one of the others.

Q How is the virus destroyed?

It can be destroyed by heat, low humidity, or certain disinfectants, but it may remain active for a varying time in a suitable medium such as the frozen or chilled carcase of an infected animal and on contaminated objects.

Q What precautions should I take if moving onto agricultural land?

Stop all non-essential vehicles and personnel moving onto agricultural land or premises. You should only move onto agricultural land to provide an essential service and preferably with the landowner's permission and knowledge. You should ensure you maintain the highest standards of hygiene for personnel and vehicles when moving on and off agricultural land. Supply personnel with disinfectant, a brush for scrubbing footwear and a spray pump to spray wheel arches etc. All vehicles entering and leaving the premises should have their wheels sprayed with approved disinfectant.

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Foot and mouth disease – advice for organisations accessing agricultural and other rural land

The current situation with regard to foot and mouth disease poses a very great risk to the farming industry in Northern Ireland. The effects of spread of the disease within the island of Ireland could be devastating. In an attempt to prevent spread of the disease, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has issued the following advice for organisations which access agricultural and other rural land in the course of their business.

Need to access agricultural land

Organisations accessing agricultural and other rural land must take great care that they do not act as inadvertent transporters of the disease. DARD requests that you give serious consideration to whether it is essential for your organisation to enter onto such land. If such access can be suspended until the foot and mouth disease situation becomes clearer, then we ask that you would do so and greatly appreciate your co-operation in this matter.

If you believe access is essential

Firstly we would ask that you contact the Divisional Veterinary Office covering the area in which you wish to work. The staff there will be in a position to advise you on the disease situation in the area. We would ask that you discuss, with the staff, the work you intend carrying out and base your decision in this information.

If you are proceeding with access

Staff going on to agricultural land should be equipped with protective clothing which is capable of being effectively cleansed and disinfected. They should take with them a supply disinfectants, buckets and brushes. The disinfectant used must be approved for foot and mouth disease control by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. A list of such disinfectants may be obtained from Divisional Veterinary Offices or on the DARD website at www.dani.gov.uk/footandmouth. When using disinfectant, appropriate health and safety precautions must be taken. The manufacturer's safety data sheet should be consulted. A COSHH assessment must be carried out and all health and safety requirements complied with. The following information is for general guidance only.

To protect the skin from disinfectant, operators should wear the following waterproof protective clothing: boots, overalls (or coat and leggings), headgear and gloves. Waterproof clothing means clothing made of rubber, plastic or similar impervious material which can be washed down and disinfected.

Landowners should be contacted and asked for the safest and most direct route to the area to which you require access. They should be asked to remove any livestock from this area and your workers should stay as far away from animals, their excrement etc. as possible.

Unless it is unavoidable, vehicles should not be taken onto agricultural land. Cleansing and disinfecting contaminated vehicles effectively is not easy. It is preferable that they be left on or adjacent to public roads and that personnel proceed on foot with smaller equipment.

Workers should move about on the land as little as possible and stay for as short a time as possible.

On leaving the premises, workers should cleanse and disinfect their protective clothing and equipment. (See guidance above.)

Any vehicles taken onto the site should be cleansed and disinfected. The whole vehicle must be thoroughly cleaned and free from mud, dung and any other dirt. Disinfectants are only effective in clean conditions. Not only does dirt act as a barrier between the disinfectant and the surface to be disinfected. It also interacts chemically with the disinfectant to render it less effective. Particular attention should be paid to the hidden underside of the vehicle, including the wheel arches where dirt tends to cling and cake, and to the tyre tread or tracks. The dirt should first be soaked with disinfectant. This should be done using a low-pressure applicator such as a knapsack sprayer. To remove the dirt, a power hose will be required in most cases but the creation of an aerosol may necessitate the use of eye and respiratory protection. All washings should be mixed with disinfectant before being allowed to enter drains. Contamination of watercourses with disinfectant must be avoided.

Approved disinfectant should then be applied to all external surfaces of the vehicle, taking special care with the underside, wheel arches, tracks etc. and the interior of any vehicle which has carried livestock or agricultural produce. This should be done using a low-pressure applicator such as a knapsack sprayer. The use of a high-pressure hose is more hazardous as the disinfectant solution in aerosol form is more likely to be inhaled necessitating the use of a high-specification mask.

When cleansing and disinfection of the vehicle has been completed, all protective clothing and equipment should be hosed down. The operator should wash all areas of exposed skin.

Consideration for our agricultural industry

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is aware that the precautions outlined above will mean considerable inconvenience to those involved in accessing agricultural and other rural land in the course of their activities but would stress that transmission of this most contagious and economically significant disease must be avoided at all costs.