

FMD back in Britain

A full scale-emergency operation is on its way in the United Kingdom, where an outbreak of the highly infectious viral disease foot and mouth disease (FMD) was confirmed on Friday 3 August 2007.

The disease was confirmed on a cattle farm near Guildford, Surrey, just southwest of London in the UK. The farmer had noticed 40 animals with symptoms of FMD on Thursday 2 August. The animals at the farm will be culled on Saturday

The source of the outbreak is unclear. The infected farm is located very close to the World Reference Laboratory for FMD in Pirbright. This laboratory receives samples for analysis for FMD from around the world. The possibility cannot be excluded that virus has escaped and infected the animals at the Guildford farm. That would mean we are dealing with an isolated case.

The big question for animal owners is: for how long has the FMD virus been at the farm, and has it already spread?

The UK has imposed a 'stand-still' meaning farm animals cannot be moved until further notice. Susceptible animals are cattle, zebus, domestic buffaloes, yaks, sheep, goats, swine and wild boar. Camelidae (camels, dromedaries, llamas, vicunas) have low susceptibility. Other EU member states are now frantically monitoring recent animal imports for signs of FMD. Farmers' organisations across Europe have warned their members to be vigilant as everybody has the experiences of 2001 still fresh on their mind.

FMD struck the EU for the last time in 2001, causing havoc in agriculture and the rural communities of the UK, Ireland, France and the Netherlands. Many millions of animals were culled and the total cost to the economy was many billions of euros.

Rapid action is crucial for the control of any infectious disease and especially FMD. Rapid tracing of animal movements needs to be done. So-called 'sequencing' of the FMD virus found at the farm will provide information about the infection source and whether the virus indeed came from the laboratory in Pirbright. Owners of cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, camelids, and deer, and zoos needs to be very vigilant and check for symptoms of the FMD.

The EU allows its member states to vaccinate animals against FMD. Vaccine banks are in place to cater for all seven of the main FMD virus types. The EU allows the free sales of milk from vaccinated cows. Meat produced from vaccinated animals can be sold in the whole of the EU after 1-3 months following vaccination. Vaccinated animals cannot be traded across borders.

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