2 INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Introduction

The Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) epidemic of 2001 was one of the largest in history. Our Inquiry sets out the lessons to be learned from it and makes recommendations for action.

This is the report of one of three independent inquiries announced by the Government in August 2001. The Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food published its report in January 2002. The Royal Society published its report into infectious disease in livestock in July 2002. We have not sought to duplicate their work. Nor have we gone into detail on the financial aspects of the outbreak, which have been covered by the National Audit Office in its report published in June 2002.

It is worth making two points at the outset. First, given the wide spread of the disease throughout the country prior to detection, the impact of this outbreak was bound to be very severe. Even had everything been done perfectly by all those concerned to tackle the disease, before its identification had not been fully recognised. Information systems were incomplete and had to be developed during the outbreak.

Knowledge within government of some changes in farming and farm practices was limited. In particular, the nature and extent of sheep movements which contributed to the widespread dispersal of the disease before its identification had not been fully recognised.

Opening COBR towards the end of March and the personal intervention of the Prime Minister, were both pivotal in managing the crisis. They brought to bear the full weight of Government on tackling the disease. A few days later and 35 days into the crisis, a scientific advisory group gathered for the first time under the chairmanship of the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government.

A network of Disease Control Centres was set up in those areas where the infection was at its worst. These Centres, each run by a senior Regional Operations Director, made major contributions to controlling the disease.

Because disease control policy had not been debated widely before the outbreak, arguments took place as the disease was raging. Changes, in particular to culling policy, were introduced at short notice. Often they were poorly communicated. Large parts of the farming and wider rural community became mistrustful of Government and the public and the media – which had initially been broadly supportive of the Government’s approach – turned against it. In particular, the policies of culling apparently healthy animals, within 3km of infected premises, or on contiguous premises, became very unpopular, despite their contribution to disease control. Management of carcass disposal was a major concern, particularly in the early days, but improved significantly after the armed forces became involved. However, the organisation of the scheme for disposal on welfare grounds was poorly managed and costly.

The issue of vaccination assumed a high profile, not least in the media. However, by the time it was agreed that vaccination should be used to help control the disease in Cumbria, the disease had passed its peak. In the event it was not used, largely as a result of opposition by the farmers’ unions and parts of the food industry.

As the disease declined, an exit strategy was developed. This included targeting resources to the areas of residual disease, coupled with a robust use of biosecurity and a programme of blood testing. The introduction of the autumn licensing scheme for animal movements caused considerable difficulties and hardship for farmers.

Summary

The last major epidemic of FMD in the UK was in 1967-68. Following that outbreak, the 1968 Northumberland Report made a number of recommendations for action, some of which were still relevant in 2001.

An outbreak of FMD was unexpected. Neither MAFF nor the farming industry was prepared for an outbreak on a large scale. The Ministry could not cope with the unprecedented chain of events which allowed the disease to go undetected for some weeks. However, in those areas where the number of cases remained low, disease control was more effective. Ultimately, the disease was contained and was prevented from becoming endemic.

A contingency plan was in place, and agreed by the European Union, but it had gaps and had not been shared widely or vigorously rehearsed outside the State Veterinary Service. The scale of the outbreak, and the way in which it spread, could not have been anticipated. The State Veterinary Service had, over the previous two years, expressed internal concerns about their readiness for an outbreak of FMD. These concerns were not relayed to Ministers. Warning signs, from the experience of classical swine fever in The Netherlands in 1997 and in Britain in 2000, were not acted upon. The country was not well prepared for what was about to unfold.

The first responses to the early cases were not fast enough or effectively co-ordinated. The paramount importance of speed, and especially the rapid slaughter of infected animals, was not given over-riding priority early on.

The introduction of the autumn licensing scheme for animal movements caused considerable difficulties and hardship for farmers.

In Scotland, with a different management structure and closer relationships between central government, local government and the farming industry, the outbreak was better managed. Contingency planning had been more systematic and the disease did not spread so far. Key problems were identified early and dealt with quickly. In Wales, the lack of devolved powers for animal disease control was a source of tension and resulted in blurred lines of communication, responsibility and accountability between the National Assembly for Wales and MAFF, now DEFRA.
The overall costs of the outbreak were enormous, totaling over £8 billion. Millions of animals were slaughtered. Different sectors of the economy were affected in very different ways. Farmers were compensated for animals that were culled for disease control purposes and for welfare reasons. Rural and tourist businesses however received very little recompense. Farmers whose stock was not culled, but who were subject to strict movement controls, received no compensation at all. Systems for valuation had not been developed in advance of the outbreak.

Looking ahead, the processes of horizon scanning, contingency planning, rehearsal and learning from mistakes should become part of government routine. The creation of DEFRA which replaced MAFF after the General Election in June 2001, and brought together agricultural and rural issues, offers the opportunity for such developments to take place.

Good communications are vital to any organisation’s business. For a Government in time of crisis they are critical. This requires accurate, up-to-date, well targeted and local communications systems, using the best technology available.

Our report contains a series of recommendations which, if acted upon, will help ensure that: the chances of exotic animal disease entering the country are reduced; the farming industry itself is less vulnerable to outbreaks of infectious animal diseases; and that, if such a disease does occur, the impact is minimised.

Our recommendations form an ambitious agenda. But, taken in conjunction with the programme set out by the Policy Commission on Farming and Food and underpinned by the recommendations of the Royal Society’s scientific report, we believe that they offer the opportunity to transform and protect the rural and agricultural economies and communities of Britain.

3 LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

The FMD outbreak of 2001 had a profound impact on all those communities and individuals involved. Collective learning from such a massive experience can have great value if it is carefully analysed and then well used.

Perhaps the biggest lesson of all is that no amount of effort can eliminate the risk of damage from FMD. To reduce the risk of economic damage as far as possible, requires a range of co-ordinated actions by Government, the farming industry and others in the rural economy working together.

Drawing on the experiences of the 2001 outbreak we have identified a number of themes which need continuing attention. These are the major lessons to be learned:

• Maintain vigilance through international, national and local surveillance and reconnaissance.
• Be prepared with comprehensive contingency plans, building mutual trust and confidence through training and practice.
• React with speed and certainty to an emergency or escalating crisis by applying well-rehearsed crisis management procedures.
• Explain policies, plans and practices by communicating with all interested parties comprehensively, clearly and consistently in a transparent and open way.
• Respect local knowledge and delegate decisions wherever possible, without losing sight of the national strategy.
• Apply risk assessment and cost benefit analysis within an appropriate economic model.
• Use data and information management systems that conform to recognised good practice in support of intelligence gathering and decision making.
• Have a legislative framework that gives Government the powers needed to respond effectively to the emerging needs of a crisis.
• Base policy decisions on best available science and ensure that the processes for providing scientific advice are widely understood and trusted.

These lessons should be incorporated into a national strategy designed to:

• Keep out infectious agents of exotic disease.
• Reduce livestock vulnerability by reforms in industry practice.
• Minimise the impact of any outbreak.