



Farm Vet News

Endell Farm Vets Blog

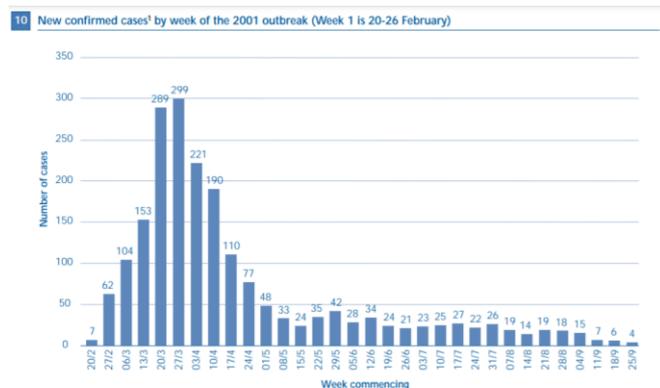
Endell Vets Beef Team

02/04/2021

Foot and Mouth Disease 20 Years On

WHAT WAS LOST

The first case of the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak was identified in Essex on 19th February with a second diagnosed 300 miles away in Northumberland only four days later. With the initial cases identified at the start of spring the welfare impact was immense on all farms with animals trapped in fields with inadequate feed or space for the start of lambing or calving. By the time the UK was declared disease free in January 2002 there had been over 2000 cases detected across Great Britain with almost 6.5 million cattle, sheep and pigs culled across over 10,000 farms.



NOTE

The effects of the disease were felt across the whole country and particularly in rural areas with the cost being more than just financial as the emotional toll was felt by farmers and vets, regardless of whether their area was affected. The general election was delayed, public rights of way were closed, the tourist trade to national parks almost ceased and there was a ban on the sale of British livestock. In Hampshire and Wiltshire there were few cases diagnosed but, as with the rest of the country, people were transfixed by the media images of pyres of animal corpses being incinerated. Normal veterinary work ceased, and farmers essentially had to self-isolate on their farms.

As we come out of a very different pandemic it seems an apt time to look back at a disease that forever changed UK farming and look forward to the future.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The risk of new and emerging diseases remains; these include swine fever as well as other contagious diseases that will spread with climate change if adequate biosecurity is not observed. TB is a daily threat, costing the industry money and livestock and the plan to eradicate TB by 2030 seems ambitious! The challenges associated with Brexit are many, and probably not all understood yet, but include the loss of/change to subsidies and New Forest headage payments and the increase in veterinary certification particularly associated with exports. Elsewhere a lack of council farms and younger livestock farmers leave the path for the future of farming uncertain but with plenty of opportunities and at least the knowledge that our ability to tackle these challenges have never been more robust.

WHAT WAS LEARNT

The scale and speed of spread of the 2001 FMD outbreak was unprecedented with farm vets facing a relentless battle of trying to diagnose cases correctly and rapidly and subsequently supervise culling. However out of the ashes came lessons which appear to have stood the country in good stead for subsequent disease outbreaks.

Feeding swill is now banned, passports and livestock movements are far more strictly recorded (especially for sheep and pigs) and the movement standstills that occur after bringing animals onto a farm are a consequence of the 2001 crisis. In 2007 there was a laboratory leak of FMD virus, but a widespread outbreak was halted before it spread beyond the local area. Gene sequencing technologies allow tracking of virus variants which allowed confirmation of disease eradication in 2007.

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The delay in implementing a UK-wide movement ban is widely implicated in the scale of disease from 20 years ago and if a new outbreak were to be detected this would be introduced immediately. Some of these changes in disease control can be seen in how the avian influenza threat was handled this winter. Population and infection dynamics are better understood for many notifiable diseases now than they were 20 years ago which ensures that the correct measures are promptly actioned.

It is not just disease control that has improved but also mental health awareness and support services. A 2005 *BMJ* study assessed the impact of FMD once it had been eradicated. Despite no increase in NHS mental health service demand, the study concluded it had been a human crisis as much as an animal one. The COVID-19 pandemic has once again highlighted the impact of physical disease on mental health but has also emphasised the importance of communication and community. We are lucky that, unlike 20 years ago, technology can now aid in those aspects as can services such as rural support services:

- Farming Community Network (03000 111 999)
- YANA (You are not alone – 0300 323 0400)

THE TEAM REMEMBERS

Sarah Matthews was working part time at Cedar Alresford at a time that it was a true mixed practice. She remembers each farm going into their own lockdown with disinfectant beds at their gates, parking outside the farm and sloshing FAM on car wheels – effectively stripping paint and chrome in the process! Initially the work became emergencies only but as the outbreak progressed work became checking animals to allow them to move under license, signed in triplicate with green OV stamps. Each morning there would be reams of fax instructions from MAFF for the following day's visits to check mouths and lame sheep. 'Sheep have a surprisingly large number of ulcers on their dental pad'. If you did call into MAFF everyone on farm was then stuck there for hours with increasing tenseness before they turned up and signalled a false alarm... There was a 'moral pressure at not being the one vet who missed FMD!' At the time vets relied on the Vet Record for the weekly news and epidemiological maps piecing together the disease spread. 'I don't think anyone (including MAFF) realised the extent of animal movements around the country; traceability was a foreign word'. As the advice was not to drive through positive areas the ability to travel around the country ceased and trips abroad were cancelled due to not wanting to leave your own animals. 'The more you think about it the more similarities there are with our pandemic now'.

Mel was a university student studying Animal Science but as for many she remembers burning pyres of bodies. When on her lambing placement in 2002 she remembers a story of pregnant ewes trapped in a field across a road that was uncrossable due to the restrictions. With grass running low, no shelter and lambing imminent a bridge was built with the help of villagers and other local farmers before special permission was granted by MAFF to move the sheep over the road and home. Likely just one of many collaborative efforts. Mel says 'I'm not sure the general public always appreciate quite how attached to their animals farmers become – it's not just about money, compensation just isn't enough'

Jane was a mixed practice veterinary nurse particularly assisting large animal work. As for Sarah she remembers a high reduction in the number of farm visits. It was a difficult time both as a farmer and trying to provide support to farm clients. One of Jane's main jobs was mixing up citric acid and spraying the vets' cars/wheels/arches whenever they returned to the practices. As the outbreak continued and kidding occurred 'we took our goat kid disbudding service out on the road to perform this procedure on many kitchen tables all around Hampshire!' On the farm disinfectant soaked straw mats were set up at every gate/entrance and milkmen/postmen banned from coming onto the premises. As part of the veterinary service a metal bin at the garden gate served as a drug collection point for local clients until 'nearly at the end of the terrible time it was actually stolen, despite its leaky base!' Everyone was terrified, market prices hit rock bottom and the television cover was shocking 'with the huge loss of invaluable bloodlines, horrific fires and thick billowing smoke'. There was little support for farmers from any avenue – the farm lost £1000 in one day as they sent cattle to market on the first day of the outbreak and the bank refused to discuss the situation.

Lucy was at school in Essex but had childcare at the local sheep farm. On the 14th March they identified an ulcer on a sheep... you can guess the rest. The day before the first outbreak they sent a consignment of finished lambs to Colchester Market but one of these remained unsold and returned to the farm. I remember the farm going from being a busy sheep dairy unit, open to the public in the summer with a variety of the usual species and hands on activity, to a place where the sole survivors were a Shetland pony and the lost looking sheepdogs. The route to swimming lessons went past the farm and the burning pyre effectively silenced an excited bus load of school children. She went to a secondary school where pupils came from the edge of London. 'They felt very removed from what was happening in my village and I actually did a public speaking assignment about the impact of foot and mouth disease on the UK' (a budding farm vet even then!) The community rallied around the farms that had lost their stock and the sheep farmer even did a stint as a French teacher at the primary school while waiting for the license to restock! He was a very forward-thinking farmer for 2001 and started an online blog: www.boydellsdairy.co.uk

