

Foot-and-Mouth "Endlösung" (final solution).

Not supported by science

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About the author:

Alistair McConnachie has a degree in Agricultural Economics. He is a farmer and freelance journalist and has organised public meetings and written extensively against the present slaughter policy for Foot and Mouth Disease. In May 2001, Alistair McConnachie was involved in the successful defence of Mossburn Animal Centre, outside Lockerbie, South of Scotland. This incident ended the compulsory contiguous cull in Scotland.



The British government's response to the present outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) has seen at least 6 million cattle, sheep and pigs slaughtered. This is around 10% of the entire national livestock herd. This figure differs from the official statistics, which do not include lambs and calves. (1)

THE SLAUGHTER POLICY

Due to the slaughter policy all animals on a farm which has been deemed to be "infected", regardless of whether all the animals are infected or not, are killed. Even more controversially, and for the first time ever in Britain, the policy also wipes out all the stock on all the farms which border the "infected" farm. This is known as the "contiguous" cull. Moreover, all the sheep within a 3-km radius are killed. The slaughter policy is built on the theory that if you slaughter enough animals fast enough you will outrun the disease, and you will create "firebreaks" which prevent the disease spreading further.

The first mention of the 3-km Kill Zone appears to be in a paper published last year by Dr Alex Donaldson and 3 other specialists, in the scientific journal *Epidemiology and Infection*. It claimed that "transmission from infected cattle or sheep could not be shown to occur over distances of more than about 3-km." (2) It appears this was the available science, which was used to justify the policy. However, this was the first time such a controversial and potentially devastating contiguous killing policy had been used. The 1967 outbreak came under control without a contiguous killing policy. Moreover, Donaldson has since updated his work in the *Veterinary Record* (12 May 2001). In it he claims that 1000 infected sheep can only spread the virus downwind approximately 200 metres. 1000 infected cattle are alleged to spread it approximately 700 metres. (3) He sits on the government's scientific advisory committee. When the disease broke in March, it is inconceivable that he did not advise the government of his latest and soon to be published, research, which could have prevented the contiguous culling policy.

During an outbreak, a very large number of infected animals could not pass without being noticed. Therefore, one is only looking at the risk of downwind spread of the virus from between 10 and 100 infected animals, on any one premises. This reduces the downwind spread to 200 metres maximum for cattle and less than 100 metres for sheep? Therefore, why the 3-km cull?

Naturally, faced with a Government policy of almost total wipe-out in 3-km "kill zones", the countryside went into a state of shutdown. Farmers and rural dwellers became paralysed, afraid to move for fear of "spreading the disease" – although nobody knew exactly how the disease was spread. Paths were closed, movement restrictions were put in place and people stopped visiting the countryside. Rural businesses went into meltdown.

AIRBORNE THEORY CHALLENGED

Indeed, eminent experts such as Fred Brown of Plum Animal Disease Centre in New York challenge even the idea that the virus can be spread in the air. He carried out an experiment – seven times – to see if neighbouring pigs separated in the same shed could spread it to each other. None of the healthy pigs caught the virus. Brown states, "There is no direct, physical evidence for airborne transmission of foot-and-mouth virus." (4)

Still the leaders of the National Farmers' Unions of both England and Scotland support the slaughter policy because they believe that a culling policy will enable Britain to regain "disease free" status quicker and hence enables the export markets to re-open sooner.

However, export markets are more likely to return quicker if vaccination is used. For example, if we use emergency vaccination – that is, if we vaccinate around the outbreaks only – then we will regain "disease free" status, and re-open export markets, one year after the last emergency vaccination, or one year after the last outbreak, whichever is the later. If we vaccinate the entire national herd, then we will regain "disease free" status and export markets, two years after the last vaccination, or the last outbreak, whichever is the later. Since vaccination will lead to outbreaks finishing sooner, then export markets will return quicker, if we use vaccination.

FARMERS LEADERS FEAR DISEASE BECOMING ENDEMIC

Farmers' leaders also fear that vaccinated animals can become carriers and that this would lead to the disease becoming endemic, which would constantly threaten Britain's "disease free" status and its export trade.

However, Prof. Fred Brown, has recently stated that infected animals can be distinguished from vaccinated animals by a simple test of their blood. If a vaccinated animal becomes infected, then it can be identified by this test. (5) He also stated that if a vaccinated animal becomes infected and becomes a carrier then it is extremely unlikely that it would pass on the virus to other animals. Many attempts to infect animals by bringing them into contact with carrier animals have failed and he knows of only one case. That also bears out the finding of the official 1968 Northumberland Report into the 1967 outbreak which emphasised that "the danger of carrier animals had been exaggerated and that carriers in a susceptible population did not constitute a significant risk". That report also concurred with the earlier Gower Report of the 1950s that: "slaughter is a crude and primitive way of dealing with the disease." (6)

Moreover, it doesn't make economic sense to base policy entirely upon achieving disease-free status for the export markets, because disease-free status is a highly vulnerable condition, and can be lost at any time. And there's no telling when the export markets may fall or disappear. Are all the Europeans really going to rush out and buy British meat again? Britain may find that nobody wants to buy its meat, disease-free or not.

ANIMALS WILL RECOVER

Affected animals almost always recover and become immune to that strain of the infection. Death occurs in a maximum 5 percent of cases, and then only in those animals with weak constitutions; for example, the very young and the very old.

Indeed, the disease is so harmless in sheep that Vets openly admit they have trouble diagnosing it. Evidence indicates that FMD is curable through the application of simple, basic husbandry techniques. For example, Henry Hamilton wrote a pamphlet in 1967 recounting how, as herd manager on the Duke of Westminster's estate in the 1922-1924 outbreak; he successfully nursed the herd through the outbreak. Those animals afflicted were simply isolated, kept as clean as possible, and treated with a mixture of Stockholm tar and salt. In other words, they were cured by the application of basic animal husbandry techniques. (7)

TRUE EXTENT OF THE OUTBREAK CHALLENGED

There is a huge potential for the mistaken diagnosis of Foot and Mouth Disease. Cattle, sheep and pigs are constantly afflicted with foot irritations. How many of these, in the present atmosphere, are being wrongly diagnosed as FMD? How many vets and Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) officials will pronounce a positive confirmation "just to be on the safe side"? This situation is heightened by the complete ignorance among farmers, vets, and MAFF officials as to what the disease, or its symptoms even look like. Most have never seen a genuine case before.

Indeed, there is growing evidence that many of the diagnoses have been wrong. For example, In the south of Scotland during March and April 2001, many sheep were being diagnosed as having "Foot and Mouth" although they appeared otherwise healthy. This led to mass killings of tens of thousands of sheep throughout the area. Only now has it been revealed that the "mystery blisters" were not related to the disease. (8)

BLOOD TEST HIGHLY VULNERABLE TO FALSE POSITIVE RESULT

ELISA - the blood test used to confirm the presence of the supposed FMD virus - does not detect the virus. It merely delivers the positive reading by detecting proteins and antibodies in the blood which are presumed to be there as a result of the presence of the virus - but which can be there for other harmless reasons. ELISA is therefore also highly liable to produce a false FMD positive response.

Indeed, Dr Paul Kitching, former head of the exotic diseases department at the Institute of Animal Health in Pirbright, Surrey - the official foot and mouth research centre - stated in an internal memo "it is important to note that at least 25% of the samples submitted from infected premises are not registering as positives." (9)

Nevertheless, all the animals on these premises were slaughtered before the results came back negative, and millions of animals within a 3-km radius of them, were also killed! Given this evidence, we are entitled to question the true extent of this outbreak.

SLAUGHTER POLICY IS NOT A SUSTAINABLE POLICY

Slaughter is on this industrial scale contrary to the whole concept of "animal husbandry". Even more a slaughter policy condemns British agriculture to a highly vulnerable future. Balanced precariously on a knife-edge - constantly fearing the eruption of a new outbreak, it will decimate everything the farmers have managed to build from the ruins of the present one. The slaughter policy is too high a price to pay.

Moreover, the consequences of the slaughter policy - for the wider community - are far too severe to ever again be tolerated. For example, the slaughter policy has been directly responsible for the animal welfare abuses, which have been perpetrated. It is responsible for the restrictions, which are being placed upon our movement. It is responsible for the devastating loss of income being suffered by

small businesses in the rural areas. It is responsible for a growing loss of confidence and trust in the police. Law-abiding people are starting to talk about how they feel they are living in a "police state". We have seen "armed response units" on standby outside the premises of farmers. (10)

If it were not for the slaughter policy, life in the countryside would have continued very much as normal. Foot and Mouth would have been just like any other animal disease that the public never hears about and doesn't care about.

TO SUMMARISE

The slaughter policy, especially the contiguous cull, is not backed by adequate science. The risk of airborne spread appears to be minimal.

Moreover, many of the alleged "infected" animals never had the disease in the first place. Millions of animals have been slaughtered in vain, and the farming and rural community has suffered considerable negative consequences as a result of this flawed policy.

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