

FMD 10 years on: How our industry has bounced back

Did any good come from the 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak? **Guy Whitmore** reports on the lessons learned from a decade ago

THE DEVASTATION caused to the UK by the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak will never happen again, according to Prof David Paton, acting director at the Institute for Animal Health's Pirbright laboratory.

He believes that 10 years on from the disaster, advances in biosecurity, tests available to detect infected livestock, and improvements in FMD vaccination capabilities, will help ensure the funeral pyres of a decade ago become a thing of the past.

Hundreds of thousands of animals were slaughtered between February and September 2001, with 2026 cases of FMD being confirmed throughout the UK, making it one of the darkest periods for British farming.

While Prof Paton points out that a total cull could still be the best approach with a localised outbreak of FMD, like that of 2007, advances



Closed: Footpaths and farm yards were out of bounds

in vaccination, testing and diagnosis capabilities since 2001 means a vaccination-to-live policy could be adopted in the future. This would mean only infected livestock would need to be culled.

"Ideally you want to have the capacity to stamp the disease out using a cull, or to tackle it using vaccinations, or both," he explains.

"A lot of research has been done, and continues to be done, which has led to improved diagnosis and vaccinations. Therefore, I feel we are now moving away from a policy of the widespread killing of animals."

Prof Paton added that in the last decade there had been a lot of work to ensure there were adequate reserves of vaccinations, as well as contingency plans put in place to vaccinate large numbers of animals quickly.

While he accepts that there may be public suspicion about buying

meat from animals vaccinated against FMD, he points out that large quantities of the meat purchased from abroad are from livestock vaccinated against the disease.

One thing the international coverage of the outbreak in 2001 did achieve though, was a global recognition of FMD, and the huge impact it could have on any nation's livestock sector.

This, Prof Paton explains, has resulted in moves to create an international consensus to deal with the disease, although he added that developing it has been a gradual process.

Martin Haworth, director of policy at the NFU, stressed that farming would do 'everything possible' to ensure the funeral pyres of 2001 were a thing of the past.

He called the seven-month outbreak the 'worst and best of times' for the NFU, and praised the hard work of staff who helped farmers get through the dark days in 2001.

"The outbreak was an utter disaster, principally of course for the farmers directly involved, but also for the industry as a whole. But the NFU excels in times of crisis, and everyone at the



Memories: The 1968 outbreak



Biosecurity: Walkers, cars, even royalty, were made to disinfect during 2001

organisation rallied to provide members with the information and help they needed," he explained.

While it was a torrid time for livestock farming, some positives have come out of the experience.

One is that the UK is much better prepared to deal with – and contain – another outbreak should it ever happen.

An example of this is the six-day standstill rule, which although can be unhelpful to livestock farmers at times, could stop FMD spreading on the same scale of a decade ago.

"By the time we realised we had an outbreak in 2001, infected animals had already been transported up and down the UK," Martin continued.

"Therefore it was a national problem from the word go, which is why such drastic action was needed. With the six day standstill

“A terrible situation, but it brought out that spirit

” Sir Ben Gill



rule, we have a much better chance of containing outbreaks, meaning alternative ways of tackling the disease could be used."

Another has been the improvement of biosecurity, yet Martin adds that it is not only the responsibility of farmers, and points to tighter measures being introduced at UK border controls.

These tighter measures can help prevent illegal meat from entering Britain, yet while Martin welcomes the development, he believes more could still be done.

This is a view echoed by Sir Ben Gill, NFU president during the outbreak, who also feels more could be done to protect Britain from infected meat being imported.

He paid tribute to the

camaraderie and community spirit shown by those in farming, and rural dwellers alike.

"There is a latent spirit within farming communities," he said.

"It was a terrible situation, but it brought out that spirit, which is always there and always comes out in times of crisis."

Sally Mitchell of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI) remembers farmers crying down the telephone, telling her that their way of life, and rural life, was 'dying'.

Yet she adds that in the decade since, rural communities have not only survived, but in many cases, thrived.

One way this happened was through tourism, something Andy Woodward – chief executive of Farmstay UK – believes improved dramatically after the 2001 outbreak, as it highlighted the importance of tourism to rural economies.

This resulted in huge improvements in accommodation, which together with a renewed national interest in locally produced food and the natural environment, created a desire for British holidays and breaks.

"From such a tragic start, the rise in interest in the countryside in the last decade has been phenomenal," he said



Remembering: How the press covered the farming disaster



“The outbreak was an utter disaster

” Martin Haworth