Latest foot and mouth scare is the stuff of sci-fi nightmares

AIDEN SHEEHAN

As the Department of Agriculture was yesterday (Friday) to be instructed to prepare for foot and mouth disease, it was revealed that the disease was the most common cause of death in the country. The disease has killed 1.2 million animals in the past 20 years, according to official figures. It was also revealed that the disease is more prevalent in the south of England, where it has been found in 12 of the past 15 years. The disease is caused by a virus that attacks the animal's respiratory system and is spread by contact with infected animals or contaminated materials.

Brown applies the lessons learned from Blair errors

Brown's application of the lessons learned from the Blair errors has been noted by many commentators. His approach to the crisis has been described as more measured and less reactive than Blair's. Brown has emphasized the importance of early warning and containment measures, and has been praised for his quick response to the outbreak. However, some critics have noted that Brown's approach is not significantly different from Blair's, and that the government has failed to learn from past mistakes.

There is no doubt that Blair's image has been damaged by the crisis. The government has been criticized for its slow response to the outbreak, and for not providing clear guidance on how to prevent the disease from spreading. The government has also been accused of not doing enough to prepare for the crisis, and of not providing adequate resources to combat it.

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By Aideen Sheehan
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[Sic] nightmares stand to us now if the disease spreads further - such as much greater animal traceability and a halt to the merry-go-round of animals being sold and moved hither and thither for days on end. Its resilience makes it harder to find out how it spreads.

However, the revelation that the EU's reference laboratory at Pirbright in Surrey - the very place to which we send suspect samples of foot and mouth from Ireland and the rest of the world - is now being investigated as its source is like the plot of a chilling horror movie. All through the foot and mouth crisis six years ago, the country used ot wait with baited breath for the latest news from Pirbright as suspect samples were dispatched there to be subjected to the last word in state-of-the-art analysis.

The strain of foot and mouth found on the Surrey farm on Friday has now been found to be identical to that used at Pirbright in order to make the vaccines that is used in some countries to protect against the disease.

It's a strain that harks back to the 1967 outbreak of the disease, but one no longer found in animals in many of the frequent worldwide outbreaks since then.

The plot thickens of course - and there's a second possible suspect - the US pharmaceutical company Merial, which shares a campus with the Pirbright Institute of Animal Health and manufactures large quantities of the vaccine.

Both sides are now trying to pass the buck - proclaiming the excellence of their biosecurity measures, but UK investigators are on-site, with promises to identify the source within 48 hours. That's an unimaginably short timeframe for Irish people, who are more used to the simplest inquiries dragging on for years on end, but hopefully we will get answers.

Foot and mouth disease is notoriously easy to spread around. IT is able to live in the ground for many months, and can spread on car tyres, footwear and by animals, humans or food - not to mention the possibility of it being simply carried by the wind.

Unfortunately, that very resilience may make it harder to find out exactly how it spread in this case - whether through human error, malicious intent or a technical lapse.

However, but the main ambition must be to stop it getting out against or spreading further. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's immediate return to London from his holidays this weekend to head up efforts to halt the disease's spread was an immediate welcome sign that his government will make this a priority.

Last time round, foot and mouth cost Ireland an estimated £200m. However, the misjudged, error-strewn response in Britain ended up costing them £12bn in farm losses and damage to tourism.
Aideen Sheehan. (Aug. 06, 2007). Latest foot and mouth scare is the stuff of sci-fi nightmares. Irish Independent. That's not counting the incalculable damage caused to agriculture there, as the prolonged outbreak sapped morale, symbolised by the horrific images of burning funeral pyres of a staggering seven million slaughtered animals.

Anxiety

In Ireland, farmers have been quick to point the finger of suspicion for foot and mouth at beef imports from Brazil - though their claims have been discounted by the revelations from [Pirbright] Surrey. They are right that the potential failure of a flagship EU reference laboratory that gave rise to this case does not exactly inspire confidence in the EU authorities.

However, they leave themselves open to the criticism of opportunism if they continue to beat the Brazilian drum.