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Foot-and-mouth is knocking on Europe's door

Jeremy Hunt finds out whether UK livestock is under threat of another disease outbreak

The return of foot-and-mouth disease probably remains one of the livestock industry's biggest fears.

And while lessons have been learned since the 2001 outbreak concerning control and the introduction of on-farm biosecurity, the

threat of another foot-and-mouth outbreak is ever-present.

Although DEFRA says it doesn't want to appear alarmist in any comments it makes about the level of risk posed by a new outbreak of foot-and-mouth, the disease is ticking the borders of the EU in

Turkey and was present in Bulgaria in 2011.

These countries may be considered far enough away to pose little threat to the UK, but complacency will be a high price to pay if a diligent approach to biosecurity isn't a new year priority for all UK livestock farmers.

Alick Simmons, the UK's deputy chief veterinary officer, says while he agrees the risk to the UK from foot-and-mouth is "very low" and there's no imminent prospect of the disease returning, he stresses the risk level can never be eliminated.

"Farmers must remain vigilant, be aware of the clinical signs of the disease and be prompt in reporting any suspicion to DEFRA vets," says Mr Simmons.

CURRENT EU SITUATION

The current situation in Europe shows that the 27 EU member states are free of foot-and-mouth and have been for two years since the last outbreak in Bulgaria in January 2011.

But around the margins of the EU there is foot-and-mouth disease – something Mr Simmons acknowledges does present some degree of a threat.

"Foot-and-mouth disease is well established in Turkey and there are a number of different serotypes circulating within its domestic livestock. There's an active programme of control and there's EU money financing it.

"In North Africa – Libya and Egypt – and probably as a result of the political instability in those countries, more disease has reoccurred there and has probably moved up from sub-Saharan Africa. There have also been outbreaks in Israel and Syria,"

*** Foot-and-mouth disease is well established in Turkey. There's an active programme of control and there's EU money financing it**

Alick Simmons, UK deputy chief veterinary officer



says Mr Simmons.

So is foot-and-mouth endemic in these countries or are they sudden outbreaks? According to DEFRA, it's a combination of both. There may be an endemic strain that circulates slowly but then, as a result of stock movements from outside these countries, there is reintroduction of a new serotype.

"Because there's no cross-protection between different serotypes, new epidemics of the disease occur over and above those already present. So movement of animals out of sub-Saharan Africa and into North Africa is what drives the disease in Egypt and Libya."

TRADE CONTROLS

DEFRA says there's no trading in meat products between countries affected by foot-and-mouth disease and the UK, but there are "properly overseen controls" covering imports from other countries to keep the risks associated with imported meat down to the absolute minimum.

"The most important route for



DEFRA secretary Owen Paterson looks at the year ahead

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Primera research
New Zealand genetics could improve UK sheep industry efficiency by increasing lamb output and production efficiency, according to new research.

The work, carried out by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, found that by switching from Mule to Highlander ewes, producers could develop a more sustainable lamb supply chain.

The trial investigated the merits of using Highlander and Primera genetics in UK sheep flocks and found that replacing Texel rams with Primera resulted in faster growth rates and a higher proportion of high-value cuts. However, Primera-sired lambs did have a higher fat cover.

Find out more at www.fwi.co.uk/primera

Academy enrolment



Our newly launched Academy page offers livestock producers the chance to not only test their knowledge, but also earn valuable CPD points.

The free online service offers farmers the opportunity to learn about a range of business-relevant topics from infectious disease prevention to rat control and worm treatment. Sign up and you'll also get the chance to win one of five £200 vouchers towards further training, course or conference attendance.

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How-to videos

Want to refresh your knowledge on how to carry out a California Milk Test or how best to deal with lambing problems?

Visit our dedicated page of how-to videos at www.fwi.co.uk/howtovideos

FOOT-AND-MOUTH: THE VET'S VIEW

* It's not a case of whether foot-and-mouth ever comes back to the UK, it's a case of when. That's the stark reality about foot-and-mouth disease expressed by leading Cumbria vet David Black.

And he says he's even more deeply worried about the ramifications of the next outbreak because as far as he sees it, little progress has been made by DEFRA to implement an effective strategy to cope with it swiftly.

"Farm biosecurity is very important, but if we don't have national biosecurity, we haven't progressed since 2001. I don't see any evidence that we've made huge strides on national biosecurity on our borders or on our policy of importing food," says Mr Black of Pargong Vets.

He is calling for more public awareness and says it's "alarming" to come through UK airports and see no system in place to identify any food that may be imported in hand luggage.

"We need much stricter controls about which parts of the world we import food from and tighter restrictions on individual shipments of meat and meat products."

Mr Black says there is no clear government policy on how foot-and-mouth would be tackled when it reappears.

"What are the priorities in the way we should tackle the disease? Should it be least loss of life? Fastest return to international trade? Is it least cost to the economy? Least cost to farmers? Least disturbance to tourism? And neither do we have a clear policy on vaccination.

"And if there was an outbreak of the disease tomorrow what would the policy be? Practising vets don't know what strategy would be activated and that's because I'm not aware one is in place. If it is, then the details haven't been communicated to vets."

Mr Black says there's a "huge assumption" by DEFRA that vets in practice will be on hand to tackle the disease. "While efforts have been made to build bridges between DEFRA and practising vets, there is still not a strong bridge between the State Veterinary Service and private vet practices.

But he says livestock producers must be aware of the risks posed by a range of diseases that can be spread on boots, clothes and vehicles.

"When buying stock, ensure they are quarantined, tested to see what diseases they may carry, vaccinated and monitored. You may be bringing infectious disease on to the farm or exposing your own uninfected stock to disease. It's a two-way process."

the disease to come into the UK would be from live animals and meat – both of which we control," says Mr Simmons.

"The acidification of meat that occurs after the death of an animal kills the foot-and-mouth virus, but it can still be found in the bones – hence the need to de-bone," he says.

DEFRA is urging all UK livestock farmers to take a "sensible and systematic look" at controlling disease risks to their farms. Whether

drastic culls were carried out in a bid to tackle the foot-and-mouth outbreak in 2001.

buying stock or taking stock on to a farm for wintering or summer grazing, all farmers should be aware of the disease risks and these need to be fully discussed with the farm vet.
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FOOT-AND-MOUTH: THE FARMER'S VIEW

* James Turner is farm manager at Brackenburgh Estate, Penrith, and while a strict quarantine policy is in place for the annual purchase of 150 Mule gimmer lambs, he admits it's very difficult to maintain the high levels that were in place after the foot-and-mouth outbreak.

"We buy-in our gimmers from the same farm every year and always quarantine them on arrival. More generally, our biosecurity isn't as high as it was in the aftermath of

foot-and-mouth, but we try to do the best we can.

"If we have a school or farmer group visit, we introduce the necessary biosecurity measures for the occasion. But while it's important to be aware of biosecurity, I think achieving much tighter border controls over what comes into the UK and covering those who travel abroad and come back to the UK, is just as important as maintaining biosecurity on the farm," he says.