

August 8, 2007

EDITORIAL

The Return of Foot-and-Mouth

You don't have to be an English farmer to understand the fear raised by the recent discovery of foot-and-mouth disease on two farms in Surrey. The last time there was an outbreak, in 2001, the farming north seemed to become a funeral pyre, and life in rural areas ground to a halt.

The fear is natural. This is a highly contagious disease, and unfortunately the best strategy for dealing with it is to enclose it within a moat of vaccinated animals — or dead ones. In the past few days, some 200 cattle have been slaughtered, and the government has ordered some 300,000 doses of vaccine. Transporting farm animals has been banned and so has the export of most animal products from Britain.

The only good thing about this new outbreak is that nearly everyone remembers 2001 and is prepared to act upon the memory, and the swifter the better. But the critical question is the cause of the outbreak. There is a chance that the contamination may have come from two nearby animal research labs.

Finding the epicenter will make it easier to decide how wide the cordon around the affected farms will have to be.

It is really worth hoping that this outbreak is contained and its cause discovered as quickly as possible. The rural economy of Britain suffered a horrifying blow from mad-cow disease in the 1990s, followed, with surprising swiftness, by an equally horrifying blow from foot-and-mouth disease. Those two diseases changed the agricultural landscape and, especially, how people felt about it. The country can scarcely afford another scourge like those.

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