

RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 13 March 2001
(*Afternoon*)

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

7th Meeting 2001, Session 1

CONVENER

*Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP)

*Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)

*Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

*Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con)

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

John Scott (Ayr) (Con)

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab)

WITNESSES

Professor Ian Aitken (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research)

Phil Flanders (Road Haulage Association)

Robert Forster (Scottish Beef Council)

Patricia Glancey (Road Haulage Association)

Mr Alastair Greig (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research)

Eddie Harper (Road Haulage Association)

John Kinnaird (National Farmers Union of Scotland)

Professor Joe Mayhew (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research)

Keith Redpath (Scottish Beef Council)

Dr Mike Sharp (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research)

Mike Talbot (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research)

Professor Mark Woolhouse (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Richard Davies

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Tracey Haw e

ASSISTANT CLERK

Jake Thomas

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Rural Development Committee

Tuesday 13 March 2001

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:37*]

Foot-and-mouth Disease

The Convener (Alex Johnstone): Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this meeting of the Rural Development Committee. The meeting was originally planned as an informal meeting. At the end of last week, however, it was changed to a formal committee meeting, so that the press and other interested parties could have free access and to ensure that other members of the Scottish Parliament who wanted to ask questions could do so. John Scott, David Mundell and Nora Radcliffe are with us; I welcome them to the committee and assure them that, if they want to get involved, I will be delighted to allow them to join in the questioning.

The purpose of today's meeting is to hear from the Edinburgh centre for rural research, which offered to make a presentation on the technical and biological aspects of foot-and-mouth disease and its control. Subsequent to that offer, the Scottish Beef Council and the National Farmers Union of Scotland asked to address the committee on the same matter. The Road Haulage Association has been invited to attend because of concerns that were raised at the committee on 6 March about the steps that hauliers are taking to prevent transmission of the disease. The meeting has now been called on a formal basis, so everything that we say will be reported in the *Official Report*.

The committee may wish to take up what it learns today with Ross Finnie when he attends our meeting next week. We shall take each organisation in turn and I shall invite witnesses to give a brief introduction, before allowing members to ask questions.

Our first witnesses, from the Edinburgh centre for rural research, have said that they might wish to use an overhead projector. Copies of the slides can be found on the Parliament website among the papers for this meeting. The Edinburgh centre for rural research witnesses are a group of veterinary and scientific experts who have knowledge of foot-and-mouth disease.

I ask Professor Mark Woolhouse to give a

presentation and to introduce his colleagues, after which members will ask questions.

Professor Ian Aitken (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research): I suggest, convener, that I give a brief introduction, rather than Mark Woolhouse.

I am the scientific director of the Edinburgh centre for rural research, which is a consortium of research institutes that have interests in rural aspects of Scotland and further afield. Our interests range from agriculture through to the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland. Both agriculture and the Royal Zoological Society are directly affected by the current outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease.

Members of some of the Edinburgh centre for rural research's constituent organisations—who are knowledgeable about the disease—will respond to questions and provide answers that might be helpful to members. To set the scene, it will be useful if my colleagues introduce themselves and briefly state their interests and expertise.

Professor Mark Woolhouse (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research): I am professor of veterinary epidemiology at the University of Edinburgh. I have, for eight years, been researching foot-and-mouth disease in collaboration with the Institute for Animal Health.

Dr Alastair Greig (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research): I am from the Scottish Agricultural College veterinary science division. I have an interest in foot-and-mouth disease, because we have worked in diagnostic centres throughout the country and we might come across the disease at any time.

I spent a short time working on the 1967-68 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease and I also spent five years at the Institute for Animal Health at Pirbright, working on foot-and-mouth disease and associated exotic diseases.

Professor Joe Mayhew (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research): I am professor of clinical studies at the veterinary school that is based at Easterbush veterinary centre, where we have an equine, farm animal and small animal hospital. There is a dairy and sheep farm next door. My main involvement has been in taking precautions against the disease spreading to that area, including through students coming and going.

Dr Mike Sharp (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research): I am from the Moredun Research Institute in Edinburgh. My interest, over many years, has been the pathogenesis and control of viral diseases of large and small ruminants.

We share the nervousness of farmers in Scotland because all of our experiments and the entire enterprise at Moredun are at the same sort

of risk as farming enterprises.

Mike Talbot (Edinburgh Centre for Rural Research): I am the secretary to the Edinburgh centre for rural research.

Professor Aitken: That gives the committee some background on the people who are gathered here. They have present and past experience of foot-and-mouth disease and are happy to respond to questions.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I am the MSP for Dumfries.

One of the issues that the National Farmers Union of Scotland has raised with me is that it is unclear about how long after the final case farmers will be able to restock or use the land again. There seems to be a lack of clarity about whether it will be 30 days or 42 days and whether it is after the last outbreak in that area or the last outbreak. Can you advise the committee on that?

Professor Aitken: That is a very specific question. My colleagues are shaking their heads. Guidance on that would have to come from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, because it has statutory responsibility for determining when restrictions will be lifted.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Nick Brown, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, stated on television at the weekend that he was certain that the foot-and-mouth outbreak has been brought under control. This morning, I got a different picture from Jim Walker of the NFUS. Will you help the committee by defining what the phrase "to bring under control foot-and-mouth disease" means, and when that can be said to have occurred?

14:45

Professor Woolhouse: We cannot say what Nick Brown means when he says that a disease has been brought under control. From an epidemiological perspective, the definition is clear: it is when each outbreak leads on average to fewer than one new outbreak. If that is the case, one can be sure that the trajectory of the epidemic is downward. At the moment, the data are only just coming in that will allow us to assess that trajectory. It is difficult to make an assessment at this stage.

Fergus Ewing: Can you describe the various degrees of the risk of transmission of foot-and-mouth disease? We are told that avoidance of contact with livestock is paramount, which advice we hope is being heeded. We also hear that airborne transmission of the disease is possible. How likely is that? What about the other possible means of transmission, such as car tyres and

clothing? Can you give the committee a textbook description of the various ways in which the disease can be transmitted, with emphasis on the degree of risk that is associated with each different means of transmission?

Dr Sharp: I might best answer that question by giving members a flavour of the complexity of the biology. The risk of transmission of the disease may be regarded as a function of the amount of virus that is produced by the host. There are data that show that pigs are especially good at generating the virus—much better than cattle or sheep—and therefore pose much a much greater risk than other species. Pigs are most at risk of creating aerosols. If pigs are taken out of the equation, most of the transmission occurs through the movement of animals and their introduction into new flocks or herds. Those are the main risks. I am not sure whether I could quantify the risks and I do not know whether anybody has the relevant data yet.

Fergus Ewing: A close friend of mine—Professor Hugh Pirie of Glasgow University—notes that airborne transmission has been known to have occurred over a considerable distance over land, and over 40 miles or more over sea. Can you give the committee any specific advice about the upper limits of airborne transmission over land and over sea?

Dr Sharp: The significance of airborne transmission was not appreciated until the outbreak in Cheshire, which came about because of the plumes from affected farms that were upwind of the milk tankers that were going from farm to farm. As it turned out, those tankers were venting the virus into the atmosphere when they moved between farms. Tankers are now fitted with special filters, so that is no longer a risk.

Many subsequent studies have been conducted. The risk of airborne transmission depends on the meteorological conditions, and transmissions over distances much greater than that on which Fergus Ewing commented have been recorded—distances of almost 200 miles.

Fergus Ewing: Were those transmissions over land or sea, or does it not make a difference?

Dr Sharp: I am not sure whether it would make a difference.

Mr Greig: In one case on the Isle of Wight, transmission occurred from 120 or 130 miles away in the north of France. That is a well recorded case from recent times.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): So far, the Republic of Ireland has managed to keep itself totally free of this horrendous disease. However, the British Government's chief veterinary officer admitted on Friday that he did not know how far

the foot-and-mouth epidemic will go or when the incidence of reported cases will start to decline. I have before me an article from the Irish *Sunday Independent*, which states:

"He spoke, too, of his fears of second and third waves of infection and of how sheep who had recovered from the disease and who could not easily be identified as having been infected could still carry the virus for a further nine weeks."

Can any witness comment on that issue, particularly on the time scale of "a further nine weeks"? Would that relate to carcasses or to live sheep?

Mr Greig: The work that has been done on sheep shows that sheep that have recovered from the natural disease can carry the infection for up to nine weeks or, in some cases, for up to nine months, so there is a potential for infection. However, that must be balanced with the ability of those sheep to infect other animals. In Denmark, scientists queried whether recovered carrier sheep had, in fact, instigate a new outbreak. Research workers have been unable to demonstrate experimentally that recovered carrier animals can infect other animals in the same compound.

Mrs Ewing: Would there be the same implication for carcasses? Although I do not think that it has been happening in Scotland, the disposal of carcasses seems to be a problem in many areas. Indeed, I understand that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has considered calling in the army to help with disposal.

Mr Greig: The live animal is the important thing. In a dead animal, the pH of the meat drops as the carcass sets, and that kills the virus very quickly. It is a very infectious virus, but it is very labile when pH is altered. In the meat itself, it is wiped out fairly quickly. It is in the back of the throat, in the pharynx, that the virus seems to be carried longest in cattle and sheep.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In the introductory remarks, we heard about the Scotland-wide array of centres. I represent Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. Mercifully, the disease has not appeared in my area, but one has every sympathy for those areas in which it has appeared. As yet, the Highlands are free of it. I hear where the Scottish Agricultural College is coming from, but I am not in agreement. Does the panel agree that a unit such as the Thurso vet lab would have at least a diagnostic role—which would be helpful in the initial stages—if not an on-going role if, God forbid, the disease appeared? The maintenance of a centre of veterinary excellence would surely be a positive measure in attempting to diagnose and tackle foot-and-mouth disease.

Professor Aitken: I think that you are asking us

to move into areas of political determination, which are outside the scientific brief that we carry. Nonetheless, I am sure that, as a matter of general principle, the more suitable laboratories that are located in different parts of the country, the better. However, in order to achieve that, there must be resources available that will allow those laboratories to continue and to function. Without resources they will not be able to do so. However, political matters are not really our brief.

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I want to ask a couple of questions about carcasses and incineration. Concerns have been expressed about the fact that, after the initial slaughter of the animals, other creatures such as foxes and crows might be able to access the carcasses. Am I right in thinking that, once the animal is dead, the possibility of another creature transmitting the virus is limited or non-existent?

Mr Greig: If you were watching television last night, you will have seen a film showing that, once the animal is killed, its head and feet—the main sources of the virus—are enclosed. Attempts are being made to damp down the amount of virus that is available.

David Mundell: I do not think that that is the answer to my question, is it?

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Can carrion animals—foxes, crows and gulls—take the virus from farm to farm?

Mr Greig: Potentially, yes—as can people.

John Scott: Even after the animal is dead and disinfected?

Professor Aitken: No. Once the animal is disinfected, the situation has been dealt with.

Dr Sharp: The main source of the virus is the secretions that come from the mouth and nose and which are found, to a lesser extent, in the milk. Does your question relate mainly to sheep or to cattle?

David Mundell: It relates to both, because animals have had to be slaughtered in significant numbers and there has been an inevitable delay. In Dumfries and Galloway, we have been fortunate in that the length of time that the process takes is much shorter than in some cases in the south. Naturally, during that period, people are concerned about the possibility of further infection from carcasses. It is not possible to guard the carcasses overnight or have modified scarecrows or something similar. There is a genuine public concern about the disease being spread further by predators and vermin.

Dr Sharp: I am clearer now about what you are asking. As Alastair Greig said, there is a theoretical risk of mechanical transmission but,

realistically, that would be likely to occur only when there were frank excretions or secretions oozing from the head of the animal. That would happen principally from the mouth and the nose of cattle, because the disease is less pronounced in sheep, which is why it is difficult to diagnose in sheep. The possibility of avian transmission between premises applies mainly to cases that involve cattle.

John Scott: I am sorry to interrupt, but as a working farmer who has, regrettably, seen dead animals all too often, I know that the first thing that a hoodie crow or a gull will do is go to the head of a dead animal and take its tongue. That is the attractive piece of flesh. I find it devastating that that is not being taken into account when dealing with animals that are being left unattended, given that that is where the secretions come from.

Dr Sharp: Most of the animals that are being killed do not have frank clinical disease. That is an important consideration.

John Scott: Even so, I am still concerned.

Professor Woolhouse: I appreciate the concern that has been expressed about the delay in moving carcasses. As my colleagues have said, there is a risk associated with that. However, we should be more concerned with the delay between the time when animals become infected and show clinical signs that must be reported and the time when they are slaughtered. That is the delay that is driving the epidemic.

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): At the risk of labouring the point that other members have made, I am concerned by one of the press reports that has been circulated, in which the president of the NFU at UK level says that some farmers in the north-west of England suggest that starlings descending on buildings could transmit the virus. That would be a matter of concern. Is there a basis in scientific evidence for the belief that starlings or other birds could transmit the virus?

Are there any alternative mechanisms that could be put in place to control and contain the disease in the future? What might they be?

Dr Sharp: Starlings would play the same part in the transmission of the virus as would any other bird; they would act as a mechanical vector to carry the virus from one place to another.

Cathy Jamieson: Are you saying that, in theory, it is possible for birds such as starlings to transmit the virus? Does that mean that some of what we think of as airborne transmission might not be airborne in a straightforward way?

Dr Sharp: I could not answer the question in those terms. Saying that it is theoretically possible for birds such as starlings to act as a mechanical

vector in the transmission of the virus is as far as anybody can go.

Professor Woolhouse: Cathy Jamieson is right about the potential risk, but we must be balanced in our approach to that risk, which could be avoided by preventing the animals from excreting the virus. At the moment, we do that by slaughtering them.

Cathy Jamieson also asked whether there are effective alternative control methods. The two elements of the control programme are the placing of restrictions on movement and the rapid slaughter of affected herds. Both of those elements must be implemented effectively if the epidemic is to be contained. We all realise that that is what MAFF is trying to do.

Broader alternatives might be to do with vaccinations and so on. We would have to take specific questions on such alternatives in order to answer satisfactorily.

15:00

Dr Murray: For how long after death is the virus active in secretions?

Professor Woolhouse: The risk of an animal spreading the disease when it is dead is much lower than the risk of its doing so when it is alive.

Dr Murray: Are you able to give any indication of the time scale that I asked about?

Professor Woolhouse: After consultation with my colleagues, the answer is no. We cannot give an absolute answer.

The Convener: I have been asked to tell the witnesses that they do not need to press their microphone buttons in order to speak. Somebody in the control room turns the microphones on.

John Scott: I do not want to dominate the meeting, but I have a question about vaccination. Could you explain to my colleagues in the committee why vaccination is not a realistic option?

Mr Greig: I will start the ball rolling and my colleagues can pick up on the detail later.

Two doses of vaccine must be given before the animal becomes immune to the virus. The vaccine lasts only for six months. To be most effective, it must be specific to the strain of virus that is in the country at the time. There is a financial cost; international trade is affected. It is impossible to vaccinate young animals as the mother's colostrum can block the immunity. Vaccinated animals can become carriers. They also produce antibodies in their blood that cannot be differentiated from those in an animal that has recovered from the disease. If an animal is a carrier, it can infect other animals and cause other

outbreaks. Vaccination is not 100 per cent effective.

John Scott: It is not an option.

Mr Greig: It will be a long time before we can consider it to be an option. The knock-on effect is so tremendous that it would be a major step to take. Vaccination was considered in 1967 and 1968 but the authorities decided to walk away from it.

John Scott: That confirms my view.

The Convener: You said that it was necessary to give two shots, which would last only for six months. Would that necessitate repeated vaccination in all stock?

Mr Greig: There would have to be on-going vaccinations, which would mean an on-going cost.

The Convener: You said also that it was necessary for the vaccine to be specific to certain virus types. Does that mean that a vaccination programme that was specific to one virus would not protect the livestock of this country against any other virus?

Mr Greig: There are seven strains, as you know. The present one is O, as was the last one. The best protection is given by using a vaccine that has been developed specifically to deal with the strain that affects the livestock at that time, because the strains change with time.

The Convener: Certain articles in the press have suggested that a vaccination programme would not be particularly onerous. What do you think that implementing a vaccination programme to eradicate the disease would cost the livestock industry in terms of time, effort and money?

Professor Aitken: While my colleague is thinking about that, I will answer.

I do not think that the cost can be measured—it would be horrendous. The problem is not so much in the production and application of vaccine, as in changing the status of the recognised health situation of animals. The country would no longer be disease-free. We would live with the disease, and the cost would be in banning the export of materials—livestock and livestock products. The oncost would be heavy and continuing. My colleagues might want to amplify that.

Dr Sharp: You asked whether vaccination would eradicate the disease. It patently does not. It has never been used for that purpose. It is best used where the disease is endemic—prevalent in a country—to reduce the disease's prevalence. When that has happened, you stop vaccinating and go for culling, which will take you towards eradication. Several studies have shown that the most cost-effective way forward in a country that is free of foot-and-mouth disease and into which the

disease is introduced is slaughter and eradication. That remains the best option.

Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): Mr Greig said that vaccination was considered during the outbreak in 1967. As the disease is so infectious, it seems strange that not enough work has been done on developing a vaccine. Does such work continue? I accept what you say about vaccination not being effective at this stage, but we should prepare for the future. We do not seem to be doing that.

Professor Woolhouse: You must remember a couple of things. The virus is endemic in many regions of the world. Much research into vaccine development is being conducted. If you are saying that it has not come up with the answer that we need now, you are right—it has not. In general, I support your comment. However, there has been much research on vaccine development worldwide.

Mrs Mulligan: Is that continuing?

Professor Woolhouse: Yes.

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab): I take it that it would never be possible to guarantee 100 per cent immunity with a vaccination. Immunity would not be guaranteed beyond six months, even for those animals in which it took, and the vaccine would not take in a percentage of the herd, where the virus would continue to operate normally to create the infection. If the vaccination route were followed, the disease would be endemic.

Professor Woolhouse: That is broadly correct.

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): I will return to Professor Woolhouse's correct remark that the most dangerous delay is that between infection discovery and slaughter. No one would argue about that. I will focus the discussion on the cases in Scotland. I live in Galloway. Like my colleagues David Mundell and Elaine Murray, I have regularly visited the crisis centre in Dumfries, where there is a stark and revealing map on a wall. As of last night, there were 24 confirmed cases in Dumfries and Galloway. Of those, 23 are in Dumfries and one is in Galloway.

There is a stark difference between the two areas. I hope—touching wood, crossing fingers and every other thing—that the case in Galloway will remain the only one there. It has not yet—again I touch wood strongly—led to any more infections within striking distance. In Galloway, the largest farm by far was infected. The outbreak was discovered fairly quickly in one field of sheep in the middle of a large farm. Stock was drawn in from all the boundaries towards the middle of the farm and was duly slaughtered and incinerated.

It is fair to say that most of the farms in the cluster of 23—which is confined to Annandale and

Eskdale in Dumfriesshire—are smaller units of contact. If the outbreak is in the centre of the farm, contact is easier roundabout. As I see it, the lesson from Galloway is that the slaughter of a large number of animals where only a small number was infected created a buffer zone. I would like the scientific view on whether we should behave proactively rather than reactively as we do at the moment, when we slaughter everything on a farm when infection is found, then essentially sit back and wait for the next infection to be found before we slaughter again.

Is there a scientific case for considering the creation of a buffer zone around a farm on which an infection is confirmed? Is there any scientific evidence to show that slaughtering the stock on all neighbouring farms would create a buffer zone and help to prevent the spread of the disease?

Professor Woolhouse: I agree with your interpretation that rapid implementation of the slaughter policy in Galloway would certainly have helped to contain that outbreak. That is important.

We have to realise that this outbreak is something like the 30th introduction of foot-and-mouth disease into the United Kingdom since the second world war. Some outbreaks have taken off—this one appears to be taking off at the moment—and some have not. There is a large stochastic element to whether such introductions take off. We have heard about all the complicated transmission routes that the virus may or may not take. There is a lot of chance involved. Obviously, the chances of controlling the virus are increased by prompt and effective control measures. They just increase the chances of control. There is always a stochastic element to the spread of the virus. For that reason, it is a difficult disease to control.

I do not think that my colleagues have direct experience of the implementation of buffer zones. There may be a scientific case for the sort of control programme that you outlined, but it would be hard to work out the science of that now as events unfold so rapidly before us. The scientific case has presumably been determined previously, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has chosen the implementation of the control measures that you see. I hope that that policy will be reviewed after the outbreak, but I do not think that there is any direct evidence for buffer zones.

Alex Fergusson: Thank you for that answer. There is a huge difference between the current outbreak and any previous outbreak in the UK. In the outbreak in the 1960s, there were 2,500 cases, but they were virtually all confined to two counties. This time, the original spread of the disease was not just the extent of the disease but, once a windborne case was involved, it became the base from which the disease would spread. By

that stage, it had covered virtually the whole of the UK.

My thought at the moment is that, after the outbreak has been contained, it may be too late to look at what proactive slaughter, if I can put it that way, should have been carried out. I feel that we need to be proactive rather than reactive if we need to contain the disease. I do not accept that it is under control.

Professor Woolhouse: We answered a question on that point at the beginning. The rapid spread across the country has obviously been a marked feature of the epidemic. It is a reminder that we do not just live in a global village, we live in a global farm. There is a lot of movement of animals.

That said, the situation in Scotland is rather simpler. According to the data that are being generated by MAFF, there appears to be a single origin for the Dumfries and Galloway outbreak, which is connected to Longtown market. There are a certain number of primary cases, which can be traced directly to contacts with that market, and a number of local-spread secondary cases. There is nothing particularly complicated in Scotland at the moment, though we are always concerned that new cases may pop up for all the reasons that we have been discussing here.

At the moment the Scottish outbreak is not showing the global farm aspect. The hope is that the restrictions on national animal movements have been effective in stopping us from living on a global farm.

Alex Fergusson: Are you saying that, because we have the disease in Scotland in a fairly confined area, a buffer-zone slaughter policy is not entirely daft?

Professor Woolhouse: You asked for a scientific basis for such a policy and I cannot give you that. If you want my instincts, such a policy would potentially be helpful, but a careful cost-benefit analysis of the kind that we have been talking about for vaccination or any other control measure would need to be done. Just to implement such a policy on an ad hoc basis because we think that it might be good at this stage seems a little unwise.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): We have heard that people and vehicles can transmit the disease to other places. What steps should be taken to stop that happening if people have been in contact with someone who has been in contact with the disease? Is a risk involved? Are there steps that the general public can take? We have all heard about hillwalkers and the like being discouraged. Do they pose a big risk or a small risk? Are there steps that people could take to lessen the risk?

15:15

Professor Mayhew: I can tell you what steps we have taken and what steps we would advise the general public to take. We advise people as much as possible to keep out of all areas where livestock have been. If that is not possible, they should take precautions to prevent the spread of the disease. Disposable protective clothing should be used and not taken away from the site, even when the contact is with uninfected animals. Animals should not be allowed to roam and all dogs should be under complete control, and people should disinfect themselves if they are returning to an area where the disease could be spread, such as our veterinary college. Does that help?

Rhoda Grant: Yes. However, in places such as railway stations, where a lot of people are passing through, someone may have been in contact with the disease and no one else would know. Are there steps that people can take in such places, or is the risk of such transmission so small that it is not worth addressing?

Professor Mayhew: It is worth while to raise the point about the degree of risk. There are potential risks even from what is under one's fingernails. However, general household cleanliness is very good for stopping the spread of the virus. Washing clothes in a hot wash and routine personal hygiene can stop that sort of transmission. If there is any chance of someone becoming involved with animals that could potentially be infected, those controls work well. Household bleach, for example, is a fantastic method of killing the organism.

Mrs Ewing: On the issue of effective controls, people are concerned about what seem to be mixed messages about what they can and cannot do in the countryside. Do people at the Edinburgh centre for rural research feel that sufficient action has been taken? In an attempt to defend Ireland from the disease, sailings between Holyhead and the republic have been cancelled and a variety of other measures are being implemented. It may not be possible to protect against airborne transmission of the virus, but the Irish are doing everything that they can. Do you feel that further action could be taken and that there could be more clarity in the information that is issued to the general public, who seem to be genuinely confused about what they can and cannot do?

Professor Mayhew: I agree that there is some confusion surrounding the information that is available from all sources. It comes down to the risk-to-benefit ratio. One could take things to extremes and tell everybody to stay at home. For anyone who might return to the countryside, or who is concerned about having contact with vehicles or people that are likely to return to the

countryside, the aspects of personal cleanliness and washing are extremely important.

There is some confusion concerning what constitutes livestock, for example, whether that includes horses. The definition of livestock varies in the different papers that have been released. There is confusion, and the information could be clearer.

The Convener: As there are no further questions, I invite you to comment on what we have heard so far, before we move on.

Professor Aitken: Thank you, convener. I would like to follow up on the previous question. Sensible controls are being applied to members of the public, and we are trying to discourage contact with livestock, especially livestock with cloven hooves, which are the animals that are susceptible to the disease. However, I remind the committee that restrictions are being applied even in Edinburgh. For example, Edinburgh Zoo has had to be closed because it houses a number of cloven-hoofed animals. As the people who visit the zoo come from a great variety of places in the UK including the north-west and north-east of England, it is a very sensible idea to close it. It has been closed at a penalty, because it is dependent on the paying public for its operation.

There has been a good measure of public understanding of the difficulties imposed by this disease and of the need to remain careful and cautious in what they do. Although there might have been mixed messages, personal responsibility is the driving factor.

I want to make just one more observation about concerns over whether the disease is being controlled. Much of that issue comes down to semantics and the use of the word "control". Controls on the movement of animals and access to farms have been applied; those are all part of the management of a disease with known parameters. As a result, perhaps it would better to use the word "management" instead of "control".

The Convener: I will take this opportunity to thank our witnesses from the Edinburgh centre for rural research for their help. I am sure that, as the committee will return to the foot-and-mouth issue at some point, we will wish to speak to you again.

Our next group of witnesses is from the Scottish Beef Council. I invite Keith Redpath to introduce his colleagues and make some remarks, after which we will once more open the floor to questions.

Keith Redpath (Scottish Beef Council): On behalf of the Scottish Beef Council, I want to thank the Rural Development Committee for this opportunity to share some of our fears about the future of the Scottish beef industry. On my right is

Robert Forster, the chief executive of the National Beef Association, which looks after affairs throughout the country and of which we are a part; and on my left is John Bell, who is vice-chairman of the council and a farmer from Fife. I farm down in Berwickshire and have been very much involved with pedigree cattle and even exporting. I have recently been abroad trying to set up some genetics export business, all of which is now unfortunately on the back burner. That is quite disappointing given the world-wide enthusiasm for Scottish genetics and produce.

We have not come before the committee this afternoon to disagree with any of the Government's actions or measures; indeed, we commend and support everything that is being done to try to control this dreadful disease. We want a policy of eradication to be introduced as soon as possible.

Over the past three weeks, all our agricultural businesses in Scotland have been paralysed. Now the problem has extended far further and has badly affected other groups and industries. We really have to take note of what has happened and try to ensure that such a disaster never happens again in the UK and Scotland. We are extremely proud of Scotland's beef product, and it is acknowledged throughout the world; however, that recognition has dropped in the past three weeks. As a result, we have compiled a list of 18 measures that should be taken and which we commend to the committee for its consideration.

At such a time, we must ask various questions about double standards in the industry, especially with meat that is imported into the UK from other countries. Many of those countries do not have safety procedures and standards that are comparable with our own. We have heard scientific advice that, after an animal has been killed, the disease cannot travel in the meat. But where has the disease come from? There has not been a case in this country for a long time. The disease must have come in with something, and we need to take drastic measures to ensure that such an outbreak does not happen again. There should be much stricter measures in relation to meat imports.

We have other concerns with the current market. Scottish meat prices dropped substantially yesterday because of the amount of imports that are coming into the UK. Yesterday, I spoke to an Aberdeen wholesaler who had a lorry at Smithfield in London on Sunday afternoon. It was the only UK lorry unloading beef into Smithfield market. All the other trucks there were from other countries in eastern and western Europe and had travelled some distance. There is a lot of pressure on a pretty devastated market at the moment.

I would also like to reinforce a point that

concerns us greatly. A farmer from Grantown-on-Spey phoned me on my way up here this morning to tell me that, further to point 7 on my list, livestock is this week travelling again, under licence, from Anglesey to an abattoir in Grantown-on-Spey. I do not know what label that meat will be sold under, but it is absurd that meat should be allowed to be brought up from an infected part of the country to a lovely clean part of Scotland such as the Grantown area. I would love to see some action taken to stop that sort of thing happening while we are in this dreadful crisis.

That is all that I want to say in introduction. Thank you again for the opportunity to bring those points before the committee.

The Convener: Thank you. We now have an opportunity for questions.

When we were speaking to the previous witnesses, we discussed the possibility that an alternative control policy may be adopted—vaccination instead of slaughter. What would be the potential impact of such a policy on the market for your product?

Keith Redpath: I will answer first, then ask Robert Forster to add his comments.

I am involved in pedigree genetics and exporting around the world, and vaccination would completely finish that. Think of our heritage in Scotland. Aberdeen Angus cattle have historically been exported all over the world. Even with the demand for the continental breeds that are raised in Scotland, the genetics business has a very good future, which would be completely wiped out by a vaccination policy. That would knock the enthusiasm out of some of the excellent breeders in Scotland, who I class as being among the best in the world. That would be extremely sad.

Robert Forster will speak about the effects of vaccination on the meat trade.

Robert Forster (Scottish Beef Council): The most fundamental point when considering whether to vaccinate in attempting to control foot-and-mouth disease is that, if we vaccinated, we would no longer be part of the non-foot-and-mouth club in world trade. Any action that we tried to take in exporting any livestock product, including milk, would therefore be extremely proscribed. Although milk is not within the Scottish Beef Council's remit, it is the most valuable of our livestock export products. Quite simply, if we vaccinated, we would not be part of that club. We might be able to advance some products under restraint, but the restraint would be severe. The delivery of those products would be minimised and there would be an on-going financial penalty for as long as we continued to vaccinate and could not declare ourselves to be free of foot-and-mouth disease.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): The current crisis appears to have highlighted the lack of meat processing and slaughtering facilities in many of Scotland's rural areas, which has led to extensive transportation of livestock around the UK. You mention in the note that you gave to the committee that you think there should be more regional slaughtering in Scotland. I have just received a written answer from Ross Finnie, in which he said:

"I agree that it would be desirable if more of our livestock were slaughtered and processed within Scotland"—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 12 March 2001; Vol 11, p 138].

What are the barriers to having more facilities in Scotland, especially in rural areas, and how can we overcome those barriers?

Robert Forster: There are several points to make about that. I was pleased that a statutory instrument was passed just yesterday that relieved medium and small abattoirs of what would have been an on-going and heavy Meat Hygiene Service inspection charge. I understand that the charge will be severely reduced from 1 April. As a result, it will be easier for those medium-sized and small abattoirs that are still working to continue to work, and other abattoirs may be encouraged to take advantage of commercial opportunities should they arise.

The reason for the concentration in slaughtering is complicated. However, the single biggest pressure has been the wish of the major multiples, which have themselves become concentrated—there are only five really big ones—to take their beef or lamb only from a small number of dedicated abattoirs. One big retailer may be taking meat from only three abattoirs across the UK—one in Scotland, one in England and possibly one in Northern Ireland. That has helped to concentrate slaughtering facilities.

There is an important factor that Scotland should not overlook. More cattle are slaughtered in Scotland than Scotland itself produces. Let me stress that there is not a net exodus of beef animals out of Scotland. A great deal of work and wealth is generated by the import from England of perhaps 30 to 35 per cent, but no more, of the cattle that are slaughtered in Scotland.

15:30

The Convener: Are you talking about cattle that are imported specifically for slaughter or cattle that are imported at some stage in their life-cycle and then eventually slaughtered in Scotland?

Robert Forster: I would say both.

Dr Murray: Point 12 on your list indicates that you feel that supermarkets need to be controlled further. Members of all parties have asked

questions about the stranglehold that supermarkets seem to have on food production. What sort of controls should be placed on supermarkets? Should more support be given to the development of farmers' co-operatives, farmers' markets and other mechanisms by which meat can be produced and slaughtered nearer to home and sold locally?

Keith Redpath: It is difficult to say how we could control the supermarkets. It could be easier with meat products than with some other commodities, but the supermarkets put their suppliers under extreme pressure for price for every commodity that they retail.

Our list also mentions the Meat and Livestock Commission, which we feel could give more guidance on the cost of beef production. I know that it can be difficult to implement such guidance when there is a world market price for a commodity. The supermarkets try to force down the price of the beef that they buy, using the world market as a guide to the price that they feel justified in paying. Some sort of guidance needs to be given to the retailers about what price should be paid for the products that they are selling.

Robert Forster: The principal problem in selling a product such as Scottish beef, which I believe to be greatly undervalued, is that the retail culture in the supermarkets is one of discount. It is difficult to advance a quality product at the volume that one would like when it is burdened with high production costs, some of which help to make it special in terms of safety and quality, and when it is challenged by the price of beef that is less good that comes in from other areas. That situation is worsened by the discount culture that causes large retailers to try to sell their beef more cheaply than other large retailers.

Alex Fergusson: Who determines the price that is paid to the producer? Without the auction market system, there seems to be no basis on which to determine the base price. I wonder how that is being controlled and how the extra costs that are involved in getting rid of the surplus material in the slaughtering process are covered. Are such costs being passed back to the producer?

Keith Redpath: We are concerned that the transparency has gone out of the market as a result of the auction system not operating. A week ago, we had an R4L price of roughly 180p and, in some parts of England, the price was as low as 160p. This week, we are faced with a lot of pressure. Yesterday, some of the wholesalers were treading water for a day rather than committing themselves to prices. However, I think that the price will definitely be down to 175p or 172p and that there will be a further drop next week because the various wholesaling plants are

up to their necks in beef. A fortnight ago, when we were not doing anything, there was a huge kill in Ireland. A great proportion of that Irish beef has come to the UK.

The Convener: You made reference to a carcass grade. Can you explain the term "R4L" to members of the committee who might not understand it?

Keith Redpath: It is an average grade that acts as a benchmark in the beef industry.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I declare an interest, in that I am a sheep and cattle farmer.

In the Orkneys, many cattle are ready to go by ferry to Invergordon to be slaughtered. Those cattle are a long way from any affected area. Is there any reason why those cattle should not be moved?

Keith Redpath: There is no reason why they should not be moved. The National Beef Association has been advocating the use of collection centres. Robert Forster has argued that case at meetings in London. Orkney is the ideal example of why some areas ought to have a collection centre to allow cargoes of cattle to be moved. One of our colleagues who had hoped to be here this afternoon works for Scotbeef, which would probably deal with the cattle from Orkney. People are concerned that the current movement restrictions—that there must be only one lift and that the animals must be taken directly to slaughter—are totally uneconomic. It should be permissible for the Orkney cattle to be brought together and transported at the same time.

David Mundell: Could you explain how the process of restocking the farms that have been affected by the slaughter policy will work? How long will it take?

Keith Redpath: Robert Forster has been present at meetings when that was discussed, so I will hand the question to him.

Robert Forster: There has been little discussion on that point. Minds have been focused on the crisis and its spread. I understand that the farm has to be clear of animals for six months before it can be restocked. Because the time at which restocking would be possible seems a long way away, thoughts have not gone beyond that.

David Mundell: Without speculating too much, how long might it take to get a herd up and running again from a standing start?

Robert Forster: That would depend on where farmers pitched their purchases. If farmers decided to breed their own herd and set themselves up with a particular type of animal, it might take longer. If farmers decided simply to

replace 50 breeding cows, that could be done quickly. One problem might be that the cows would all have to be at the same stage of lactation or calving so that it was possible to arrange to have all of the calves in spring or in autumn. There might be a problem with the price as, if the virus spreads further than it has already, there would be an undue demand on a reduced supply. However, every farm would face a different decision.

Fergus Ewing: I am the local MSP for the area that includes Grantown-on-Spey. Point 7 in your submission mentions the fact that livestock from Anglesey was hauled to an abattoir in Grantown-on-Spey in a lorry that then continued to Aberdeenshire to be loaded with pigs that were then hauled to Cheale Meats in Essex. You point out that the farmer who contacted you with that news was concerned about the risk of his animals being infected with foot-and-mouth disease by a lorry that had passed through many infected areas.

I am aware of the case and was contacted about it at an early stage. Is it your understanding, as it is mine, that the movement took place before the movement control regulations were introduced and that, therefore, there is no imputation of any illegal activity on the part of the abattoir owner?

Keith Redpath: I appreciate what you are saying, but a licence has been granted for two more loads to come up this week or next week. The farmer has contacted me again and is extremely concerned that the problem is on-going, even under licence. That is appalling.

Robert Forster: The question of movement is essential as we try to minimise the spread of the disease. We are trying to stamp out foot-and-mouth disease without stamping out our industry. As a result, there must be some discretionary movement to allow, as far as possible, commercial functions to be undertaken.

The licensing system that allows animals to be moved under licence directly from the farm to the abattoir is a good idea. However, my understanding is that the travel time should be limited to four hours and that that maximum should be used only in the case of people who are finding it difficult to get their animals to an abattoir—it should be something of a privilege. The problems of the north of Scotland and of the pig industry were mentioned specifically in that context. Farmers who are bringing animals up from Anglesey to the middle of Scotland are pushing it, as are farmers who move animals from the north of Scotland to abattoirs in the middle of England and in the Welsh borders. The National Beef Association frowns on such behaviour.

An alternative solution is up for consideration: collection centres. That would be suitable for the

situation in Orkney, as it would allow a group of animals to be assembled in one place before being brought under licence to a specific abattoir. In our view, the licensing of a network of collection centres would reduce journey times, possibly minimising the risk of spreading the disease, and allow more commercial movement. We would welcome the use of such centres, because they would make sense in both biosecurity and commercial terms.

Fergus Ewing: I am grateful to you for clarifying point 7. The question is why a licence was issued in those circumstances. It might be appropriate for you to report the matter to the Scottish Executive rural affairs department, so that an investigation can be carried out.

The Convener: I understand that Alex Fergusson has a question.

Alex Fergusson: Yes. Thank you, convener. My previous question was merely a supplementary, and I have been waiting for the opportunity to ask this one.

Earlier, I asked the scientists about the scientific possibility of a buffer zone, and whether there is scientific evidence to show that such a zone would be an effective method of controlling the spread of the disease. I put the same question to you, from a practical point of view. How does your association feel about that possibility? How would your members feel if they were, in theory, unaffected but a neighbouring farm was found to be contaminated and they were told that their stock would be slaughtered to create a buffer zone? I am looking for a practical response to the same question.

15:45

Keith Redpath: I feel that it is a little too soon to implement such a measure. All the problems are restricted to one corner of the country, and we hope that the situation stays that way. We do not want the people who have to deal with the disease to suffer, but if we can keep the situation in Scotland as it is now, at some time in the future we could reduce some of the restrictions for the greater part of the country and get back to normal more quickly than if there was a mosaic pattern of infection all around the country. If the creation of a buffer zone around the infected area would help to achieve that, that would be a sensible suggestion to follow.

John Scott: Would it make sense to have better road disinfection procedures? Perhaps that is a question for the Road Haulage Association, and one that I should have asked of the scientists. Should we install foot-baths, as it were, for lorries and cars on all the roads into and out of Dumfries?

Keith Redpath: When I originally contacted the Rural Development Committee to arrange a meeting, there had been no confirmed cases of the disease in Scotland. I wanted to suggest some form of restriction at all the border road crossings, even to the point of disallowing any livestock vehicles from crossing the border. Such measures would have been possible, although the problems might have been worse for people living in the Borders, in Coldstream and Berwick, than for folk who did not live in that area.

As Scotland has now contracted the disease, the situation is different from that of a fortnight ago, when we discussed holding this meeting, and I do not know how effective it would be to establish some super-duper infection procedure at every border crossing into Scotland. However, if it was going to work, I would support any measure to keep the disease under control. Much more information would be needed from the manufacturers of the disinfectants and from the scientists who understand more about it.

The Convener: I thank the gentlemen from the Scottish Beef Council for coming along and answering our questions.

We now welcome representatives of the Road Haulage Association. I invite Phil Flanders to make an opening statement, after which we will ask questions.

Phil Flanders (Road Haulage Association): Thank you for allowing us to speak to you on behalf of the livestock hauliers in Scotland. On my right is Pat Glancey, the Road Haulage Association's area manager for Scotland; on my left is Mr Eddie Harper, the chairman of the Road Haulage Association's livestock haulage group. Eddie is one of the most knowledgeable people in the industry, and we are fortunate to have him with us today.

Through no fault of their own, hauliers are facing a cash-flow problem. Lack of earnings and, in some cases, loss of earnings are causing hardship and the possible lay-off of drivers. The biggest fear is that highly experienced drivers will be laid off and will be lost to the industry. They will get other jobs, as is already happening in parts of England. Their skills are not gained overnight, and a significant amount of money is invested in training drivers to certifiable levels. Furthermore, the specialist vehicles that are used can cost up to £100,000—the price of a 13.5m triple-deck trailer with feeding and watering facilities and an air circulation system for the welfare of the animals in transit. Such vehicles cannot be put to much other use.

One change for the better is the fact that abattoirs have been forced to allow hauliers to wash out. The regulations state that abattoirs must

have adequate wash-out facilities. What does adequate mean—a hose and a cold-water tap? Hauliers are having to pay excessive amounts to use the facilities—up to £50 for a double-decker—and Pat Glancey will provide more details on that later. At present, people are waiting six to seven hours to get washed out at abattoirs, and there are claims that it is taking longer to clean some vehicles because they have not been cleaned regularly in the past. Most livestock hauliers, who clean out regularly, are becoming frustrated because it takes them only 20 minutes to clean out once they get the chance to do so.

The moving of sheep for lambing, because of the current crisis, will have serious consequences for hauliers, as they can be held liable for any welfare problems that the animals suffer in transit. Eddie Harper will provide some information on that. On the wider issue for the rural economy, if livestock hauliers do not survive the crisis, who will carry the animals to the high standards to which professional livestock hauliers in this country adhere?

The loss of drivers is not the only great concern; the potential loss of haulage businesses is also worrying. Hauliers have years of experience, which is essential for the future. It is important for the future that we all turn our attention to resolving the situation now. Who knows what other crises will arise? We need to start tackling issues such as the licensing and registration of all carriers of livestock, including farmers and hauliers. All vehicles and trailers should be inspected. We must add to and improve the facilities at abattoirs and markets. We must ensure that no corners are cut and that confidence in Scottish and UK farming is restored. That will cost, and everyone will have to pay a wee bit extra for their meat. However, that cost is not as high as the current cost to the countryside and the country as a whole. There is no real alternative.

Patricia Glancey (Road Haulage Association): For a considerable time, one of our major concerns has been the lack of wash-out facilities at abattoirs, slaughterhouses and markets. To get a licence, an abattoir must have wash-out facilities. Until the present crisis, very few abattoirs had such facilities—not just adequate facilities, but any wash-out facilities at all. If vehicles are not washed out properly, disease will spread. We also have a grave concern about the types of vehicles that are being used to transport animals during the crisis. That is why, as Phil Flanders said, we require all farm vehicles and hauliers' vehicles to be inspected and registered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

What constitutes adequate wash-out facilities? If 25 people were queuing at a supermarket check-

out, another check-out would be opened. Yet hauliers wait for seven hours to come out of abattoirs, because some vehicles take longer to wash because they have never been washed or disinfected. There should be a professional system for the movement and registration of vehicles that transport animals. Licences should be issued only to abattoirs that have proper wash-out facilities and disinfectant. This is no time to cut corners. In June, a statutory instrument on cleansing and disinfecting vehicles that are used for transporting livestock was passed by the Scottish Parliament. Unfortunately, that instrument said only that vehicles had to be disinfected within "not more than 24 hours".

We are now paying the price for cutting corners.

I agree with Robert Forster from the Scottish Beef Council; animals should not be going from Grantown-on-Spey to Anglesey or vice versa. They should not be going from Aberdeen to Shotts or from Perth to Shrewsbury to be slaughtered. There should be a time limit on the movement of animals, which should be a maximum of four hours.

Eddie Harper (Road Haulage Association): There are serious implications for the welfare of the sheep about which there is talk of moving. Farmers have a problem, because the sheep are out wherever they are being kept and are spread all over the country. The haulage industry has a serious problem in that we will be liable if we start to move the sheep, because we cannot move any animal that is likely to give birth and we are talking about sheep that are heavily pregnant. There are welfare implications all round.

If we move some sheep the distances that they will have to be moved when farmers say that they want them home, that will be horrendous for the other animals that are parked, if you like, in the fields, which will be passed over. There are serious implications, whether or not we move those animals. We are concerned about the distance that we might have to move some of them.

I could not agree more with Robert Forster from the Scottish Beef Council about the four-hour journey. I was party to that suggestion and, in this crisis, four hours should be the maximum time for which any animal is being moved. I back Robert Forster fully. We know that, currently, loads of animals are going from Scotland to the midlands or to mid-Wales to be slaughtered. That is not right.

The Convener: Do members have any questions for the Road Haulage Association?

Dr Murray: I spoke to a road haulier in my constituency before this meeting. The company is

a livestock haulier that employs five men and seven lorries, which have not been able to move since 23 February. Its turnover is down by £17,000. It has not laid anybody off yet, but that may be imminent.

As a national organisation, is the Road Haulage Association involved in any discussions with other bodies—the Government or others—about the specific problems of the livestock haulage industry? Who are you talking to and at what stage are the discussions?

Eddie Harper: We have been heavily involved in talks in London. Our chief executive, Mr Roger King, has been to two or three meetings at Westminster on this issue. We have a serious problem because drivers are leaving the industry; we have lost count of the number of drivers who have done so in the past seven days. Those are professional lads who have been in the job for a long time. They have left because lorries are standing still; they have mortgages to pay. Once we lose those lads, we have a serious problem if—and it is a big if at the moment—we ever get back to normal.

If we get back to normality, we will not have the experienced staff to move those animals. We will then have a welfare problem, because some companies will put anybody behind the wheel. The law says that the drivers must be competent, but there is no certification. A load of hazardous goods cannot even be moved down the road without somebody having a certificate. Why should it be different in the livestock haulage industry? There should be certificates. Many reputable companies train their staff and invest a lot of money in that training. Those lads are now leaving the industry.

Dr Murray: Are the talks with Government on-going?

Eddie Harper: Yes.

Rhoda Grant: People who are taking in feedstuff have expressed concerns to me. What steps are hauliers taking? The concern is that a lorry that is bringing hay might have stopped in numerous places before it reaches a farm. Farmers are concerned that the product might have been in contact with foot-and-mouth disease or been in an area where there is foot-and-mouth disease. They are concerned about how safe it is to take feedstuff from other areas on to their farms. What steps has the Road Haulage Association taken to cut down the risk of disease being spread through the transport of feedstuff?

The Convener: Although you are here to speak on behalf of the livestock haulage industry, am I right in thinking that one of the few other opportunities that livestock hauliers have currently is haulage of fodder?

Eddie Harper: The livestock vehicles that we use cannot be used for anything else. About 75 per cent of livestock vehicles are designed in such a way that they cannot be used for anything else. The containers can be lifted off some vehicles that date back a few years, but that cannot be done with most vehicles. They are built as specialist vehicles, and very heavy investment is required for those vehicles.

I know that a lot of straw companies—certainly in our part of the world—have stopped delivering, because of the problem of going from farm to farm.

On the livestock side, if we are going into farms, we go to one farm, we make one delivery to an abattoir and then—as the committee heard—we wait for six or seven hours to get washed out before going to another farm the next day. We do not do that without having the livestock vehicles washed and disinfected.

I do not know whether Pat Glancey knows anything about the food side.

16:00

Patricia Glancey: The livestock group has issued a directive on milk collection and animal feeds to hauliers who must go into infected areas. We have even got the Vehicle Inspectorate to give permission for some of the spray suppression parts of vehicles to be removed, so that they do not trail on the ground. We have, as far as possible, kept the rest of our industry well informed, but we have reminded hauliers that unless they must be in an area to deliver animal feed or bring out milk, they should not be there. That applies to some of the round timber hauliers, especially in Dumfries and Galloway. Livestock hauliers have very little work coming in, except the chaps who are moving some stuff, but other hauliers are affected as well. Dumfries and Galloway should be classified as a crisis area.

Alex Fergusson: I will back that up, rather than ask a question. I spoke to a haulier in Galloway last weekend, who said that he had got a contract to shift fodder from middle England and come back up. He was not allowed in middle England because he was coming from Dumfries and Galloway. Even if hauliers manage to get an alternative contract here and there, they may not get the benefit of it.

Cathy Jamieson: I declare an interest, as a member of the Transport and General Workers Union.

You made the point strongly that livestock hauliers use specially adapted or designed vehicles. Am I correct in thinking that you suggested that some inappropriate vehicles are

being used? Is there any evidence of that?

Patricia Glancey: We are suggesting that some of the vehicles that are being used for the movement of animals to abattoirs are not clean enough, that they should be inspected and that they should not be used for that purpose. That applies to farm vehicles and hauliers' vehicles. That is why we say that operators should be registered, inspected and licensed by the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food.

Cathy Jamieson: Forgive me for not knowing this, but has there been an on-going discussion about that with the appropriate authorities, which has been brought to a crucial point by the present crisis?

Patricia Glancey: The on-going discussion has been on the washing and cleansing facilities at abattoirs. What has brought the issue to a head is that, in this crisis, some people are giving work to vehicles that are not clean and livestock should not be near them. That is why it takes six or seven hours to clean the vehicles at abattoirs where the facilities are non-existent.

Cathy Jamieson: Are you suggesting that the restrictions on the length of time for movement ought to be applied only in the current situation, or do you want them to be applied in the longer term?

Patricia Glancey: The drivers' hours on tachograph and the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 cover the movement of livestock. However, in the current situation, we have great concern about beasts being moved all over the country, especially those that come from England to Scotland, which must travel through infected areas including, I am sorry to say, Dumfries and Galloway—we only hope that it stays there. Why should livestock be brought north of Dumfries or Moffat to be slaughtered?

Cathy Jamieson: I have a final question, the subject of which has been touched on. My constituency of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley is near Dumfries and Galloway, and in it there is much timber transport on rural roads. Will you expand on your comments on the other industries that rely on the haulage industry? What have been the implications for timber transport?

Patricia Glancey: Timber hauliers are not going into forests in infected areas. One of our members is on a committee of the Scottish Timber Trade Association, and its members have decided that they will not go into infected areas. They will not break the regulations. Timber will have to stay in infected areas until the hauliers can go into them. The hauliers are not going into the countryside.

Milk carriers have to go into infected areas, but they do so under regulation. They are disinfected

on premises, and as they go in and out of farms. Unless they have to go into infected areas, they are not doing so. The haulier to which Cathy Jamieson referred is not hauling timber; he is probably hauling fridge vans, because I passed two on the motorway.

Cathy Jamieson: We will not dwell on that.

Fergus Ewing: I wish to pursue the concerns about the proper disinfection of vehicles that are being used under the movement licenses that have been granted as an exception from the strict movement control policy. Do you have evidence that the disinfection of vehicles is not taking place?

Patricia Glancey: We have found that, since the regulations on foot-and-mouth came into force, cleansing and disinfecting facilities have been made available, but they are not adequate. A livestock haulier who is used to cleaning out his vehicle should be able to clean a two-decker vehicle in 20 minutes. Hauliers are currently unable to do that because other vehicles are using the facilities. Our concern, which goes back to before the statutory instrument and pre-1999, when a hauliers meeting was held in Leith, is that, at all abattoirs and markets, there are inadequate facilities for cleaning and disinfecting vehicles.

Fergus Ewing: I understand the evidence that the facilities are not adequate, and that that results in an unacceptably long wait—six or seven hours—before some of your members' lorries are cleaned. Plainly, that is not acceptable, but it is a slightly different matter from the subject of the question that I put to you. Are you concerned that, under the current licences to move animals, some lorries are not being properly disinfected, and therefore might harbour the virus and transmit it?

Patricia Glancey: Yes, that is our concern.

Fergus Ewing: Have you passed on those concerns to the authorities, in particular to the Scottish Executive rural affairs department and MAFF?

Eddie Harper: Yes. We know that vehicles that have not been cleaned out for more than a day are carrying stock to abattoirs. I know of cases in which vehicles have been confiscated in abattoirs and the drivers given their bus fares home, because they cannot clean their vehicles. Trailers have also been kept in abattoirs and the drivers sent on their way. That also concerns us, because the drivers have been sent back to the farms in whatever was pulling the trailer, be it a Land Rover, a truck or whatever.

Fergus Ewing: We are pleased that you have brought those concerns out into the open.

Eddie Harper: The main concern is about vehicles that have not been cleaned arriving at abattoirs, rather than vehicles leaving. Meat

Hygiene Service inspectors are at abattoirs to watch vehicles being washed and disinfected, and they are there until late at night.

Fergus Ewing: I am sure that the rural affairs department will take seriously your recommendation on the provision without delay of adequate facilities.

Patricia Glancey: On the last page of our submission, members will find the European Commission's guidelines on adequate wash-out facilities. Some livestock hauliers are being charged as much as £50 to wash out their two-deck cattle floats at abattoirs.

David Mundell: I have a broader question. Haulage is an important industry in Dumfries and Galloway, because a lot of people are employed in it and—because of the geography of the area—virtually all goods are brought in by hauliers. Elaine Murray and I attended a meeting in Langholm on Friday. The crisis affects every single person in that community, and hauliers are part of it. What practical measures can be taken to keep the lorries in the area while they are laid up, other than the simplistic approach of giving people money? Are there measures that can be taken to ensure that we will have a haulage industry in the area when we finally get through this crisis?

Patricia Glancey: In Dumfries and Galloway in particular, many livestock vehicles cannot be used for anything else. The box at the back cannot be removed, so the vehicles can be used only to transport animals. Unfortunately, because of the number of cases of foot-and-mouth disease in Dumfries and Galloway, some hauliers are reluctant to go outwith the area. Some people are reluctant to give the hauliers work because of the farmland that the hauliers have to cross. Everything from the ferry port at Stranraer is being disinfected.

On the practical side, anybody can get work by using a tractor unit and pulling for somebody else, but the committee must remember that the haulage industry is very competitive and that things are tight. I can assure members that hauliers are not getting the rates that they would normally get for pulling a curtain-sider, a box van or a fridge. If what they have is a livestock trailer, they must either hire a trailer, or hire themselves out just as a tractor unit. Therefore, the rates are not available that would allow them to earn anything like the money that they would earn as livestock hauliers or to pay the bills that are coming in.

A week past Friday, we had to issue information to our members about lay-offs and how much guaranteed pay they would have to pay their men. We have been in contact with the job centre to see what people can get. It is sad—firms can pay

drivers guaranteed pay of only £16.70 a day for five days a week for 13 weeks. Drivers can sign on for jobseekers allowance, but they will get nothing for the first three days. Members can imagine why a qualified driver, who has a good record and has been driving for a considerable time, would walk away and get another job. He cannot live on unemployment benefit, because he has commitments to meet, just as his boss has commitments to meet. His boss must pay for vehicles that are on loan-lease agreements, he has to pay VAT, he has to pay national insurance, and he has to pay the tax man while no money is coming in.

We do not have a solution for our members, especially those in Dumfries and Galloway. Our chief executive, Roger King, is pursuing those issues on a national basis, but we would be delighted were the Scottish Parliament to pay compensation to Scottish livestock hauliers. All that we can give our members is advice. Some hauliers in David Mundell's area are down by £3,500 a week because they are trying to retain their drivers, but they cannot keep paying out that money—nothing is coming in.

David Mundell: Do you know how many people have been laid off? There must be a cycle, as you indicated, in terms of how long it is sustainable to sit—

Patricia Glancey: Sorry?

David Mundell: There must be a limit to how long it is sustainable to sit without income.

Patricia Glancey: We do not have detailed Scottish figures. The limit is how big the haulier's bank account is, how understanding their bank manager is, and how much of an overdraft the bank manager will give the haulier to pay off workers. Very few haulage companies do not run on an overdraft.

Eddie Harper: South of the border, many hauliers have reported that drivers have left because obviously they could not live on nothing in the past few weeks, or the governor has said to them, "I cannot keep you any longer. Please try to find something else." A haulier rang me at the weekend. He had two drivers and has very luckily got them into driver agencies. One or two agencies in the south have been looking for drivers. His big problem is that they might get a liking for that work and will not come back to the livestock industry. At the end of the day, they will just sit in their cabs, back on to the unloading dock and never touch a load. That is a problem. Although we have dedicated drivers at the moment, once they leave us and go to something else, all of a sudden they might find the other side of the fence to be greener.

16:15

The Convener: There are no further questions, so I thank Phil Flanders and his team from the Road Haulage Association for helping us to understand better the industry's problems.

We are lucky enough to have John Kinnaird with us. He is vice-president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland. I have left John until last because, although he will speak on behalf of the NFUS and express his views, it will be useful to have his comments on some of the other things that we have heard today.

John Kinnaird (National Farmers Union of Scotland): Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to give evidence to the committee.

It is important to reiterate what has already been mentioned. There are 24 confirmed cases of foot-and-mouth disease within Scotland.

It is equally important to mention that the NFU is currently receiving in excess of 2,000 calls each day from concerned members and members of the farming community, including those who are not NFU members. The situation is desperate. The number of calls that we are receiving is evidence of that.

Movement restrictions have had a horrific effect, not only in economic terms, but on animal welfare. All farmers face mental stress and despair. However, the restrictions must be retained. They have been essential for control of the disease and have to remain until the disease is brought under control and completely eradicated.

We welcome the licensing procedure that allows some animals to be moved on welfare grounds, but many farms are not eligible to take up that facility. We now need seriously to consider taking more radical action.

Compensation will become an issue, but the immediate priority remains the total eradication of the disease. Costs will be considerable and will go far beyond the farming industry. We have heard about some of the costs to other sectors. It looks increasingly likely that the situation will not be resolved in a matter of weeks. It is more likely that it will take months to be fully resolved.

In the longer term, the question of how to regain our disease-free status and thereby regain our lost markets must be addressed. We cannot ignore that. It is no exaggeration to say that the industry is in complete crisis. We therefore request the full support of all MSPs in allowing the industry to rebuild and to compete again. We are not talking about handouts—we are not after those. We want the source of the outbreak to be addressed. Without a shadow of a doubt, we have not had foot-and-mouth disease in Scotland for over 40 years. The disease has been imported. That fact

must be addressed very seriously by all MSPs and MPs and involves the issue of the policing of food imports, the need for adequate labelling and the buying policy of retailers and processors.

Because of the time that has been spent on the issue this afternoon, I do not wish to give any more evidence. I would rather answer questions—we are here to do that. However, I cannot emphasise enough the degree and scale of despair that is out there. There is a huge sigh of relief in many parts of Scotland that, as yet, the disease has not reached them. We can only hope that that continues and that the outbreak that is confined to Dumfries and Galloway at the moment can be eradicated with the utmost speed.

David Mundell: In the affected parts of Dumfries and Galloway, the movement restrictions have not been lifted. We are reaching an extremely difficult position, and there are serious animal welfare issues. Somebody I spoke to last night was in tears about sheep that were in a turnip field and beginning to lamb—they were unable to get food to them. If the movement restrictions are not lifted—I do not think that they will be, and I would not necessarily expect them to be—is the way forward to have a slaughter scheme in respect of stranded stock?

John Kinnaird: If we cannot move such animals because of the restrictions on movement, we have no option but to slaughter them. On animal welfare grounds, there is nothing else that we can do. To have the disease confirmed, and for people to watch their stock being slaughtered and burned, when they can do nothing about it, is beyond belief. However, every person who has had the disease confirmed admits that that is the only way to eradicate it. When perfectly healthy stock is lambing, calving and farrowing in conditions that the animals are not meant to be in—and the farmers have no intention of leaving them there—drastic measures have to be taken. It may be unpleasant and unpalatable, but animal welfare must come first.

The Convener: I presume that there would be a difference between the movement of animals from areas that are directly affected by the disease and that of animals in areas that are under restriction only. Is there an option in areas where the disease has not been directly identified to extend the current radius for movement so that, for welfare reasons, animals can be moved over longer distances?

John Kinnaird: Yes, that could be considered. However, at all times we have to rely on veterinary and scientific advice. We will consider whether it is possible to extend the radius, but we must never forget that it is the movement of animals that can spread the disease. We have to be as near as possible to 100 per cent certain that we are not

moving the disease around. It is important, wherever possible, that people move their stock back, to allow it to lamb and calve and so on. We are rapidly approaching the main lambing and calving season.

The Convener: It would be safe to assume that no licensed movement scheme will be available in the specific area that is affected by the disease. Will it therefore be necessary to introduce at the earliest possible opportunity a scheme for the slaughter of animals on welfare grounds?

John Kinnaid: There will be no movement of animals within an infected area. However unpleasant it may be, we should address the slaughter issue head on, and introduce such an approach.

Mr McGregor: The season is nearly upon us when away-wintered hogs, which are the seedcorn of the blackface and Cheviot industries, should return home. There are thousands and thousands of away-wintered hogs. If they are a long way from infected areas, can you indicate when farmers might get a licence to bring them back? They can sometimes be more than 200 miles away.

John Kinnaid: As they are not in lamb, there is less of an animal welfare problem, so away-wintered hogs will be low down the list of priorities for movement. The problem might arise on the farm that they are on, when the farm requires the grass that the hogs are eating, for silage production or for milk production in the dairy herd.

Alex Fergusson: The convener can probably guess the question that I am about to ask. What is the view of the NFUS on the idea that I have been floating this afternoon of taking a more proactive role in preventing the spread of the disease by creating, through a radically increased slaughter policy, buffer zones?

John Kinnaid: If the disease is spreading rapidly, we must address that quickly. At the moment, all the outbreaks in Scotland are linked—that is important. It has been possible—due in part to traceability through animal records—to trace the outbreaks. That is encouraging. If the disease starts to get out of control, that is the only thing we can do, but I do not believe that it is out of control—it is still being contained.

Dr Murray: At the meeting in Langholm that was referred to—which David Mundell, Russell Brown and I attended—one of the proposals from local people was that we might consider the alternative use of land, and that people in farming could go into biomass production and so on. What is the NFUS position on that? Would you be able to offer advice to farmers who were considering coming out of farming? Could the Scottish Parliament or

the Scottish Executive do anything to assist?

John Kinnaid: Are you talking about farms that have had foot-and-mouth disease?

Dr Murray: Yes.

John Kinnaid: That should be addressed. We must never forget that, although farms on which foot-and-mouth has been confirmed and whose stock has been destroyed will have compensation, that compensation applies only to the value of the stock on the day of slaughter. A commercial herd or flock will take a minimum of five years to get back to the standard that it was at before the outbreak was confirmed. If it is a pedigree flock, there is every possibility that it will not return to the same standard for 15 or 20 years. Compensation will in no way address the need to rebuild the stock to the same quality as that which has been lost. However, if people are heartbroken and cannot return to livestock production, and if it is possible to diversify into other forms of production and that is what people wish to do, assistance should be made available to them.

Alex Fergusson: I am interested that you said that all cases in Scotland can be linked. It is my understanding that in at least one, and perhaps more, of the cases in Dumfries and Galloway, the spread has been airborne. I accept that the original link goes back to Longtown, but surely, if the odd case is now airborne, we are facing the spread of the disease through non-directly linked methods. When is a linkage not a linkage? If we go by what you said, and if every farm in the country got foot-and-mouth, we could say that that was linked, because it started from Longtown. However, I am sure that you would agree that that is not the case.

John Kinnaid: I hear where you are coming from. At this stage, I do not think that any outbreaks of the disease in any part of Dumfries and Galloway have come from anywhere other than somewhere with a direct link to Longtown. Many farms that had linkages with Longtown on the day in question have been inspected and cleared. To date, all our evidence is that there is no spread, airborne or otherwise.

Alex Fergusson: The minister announced in the chamber last week that an outbreak was caused by an airborne infection.

John Kinnaid: I have to abide by what he said, but I had not heard that. If the disease has moved only once in a week, I would suggest that it is not out of control. However, it must continue to be monitored closely.

David Mundell: My understanding is that there is more than one airborne case, and it is suggested that there is a waterborne case as well. Those cases are linked to other farms. That is

what has changed people's perspective on the matter.

That brings me on to the issue that I wanted to raise: the general well-being of the farming community. We went through a period when all the cases were linked to dealers and linked directly to Longtown market. Then those cases peaked and appeared to tail off. In the middle of last week, there was a false dawn when there were no new cases. Then there was the Hartwood case, which was airborne, and a number of other cases.

Farmers have now been holed up in their farms for over two weeks. Instead of a general feeling that things are getting better, there is a feeling that things are getting worse. The likelihood of a farm getting foot-and-mouth disease is much worse. Farmers are much less keen to send their children to school and are less keen that their wives go out to their work. Are we managing that well enough, to ensure that the welfare of farmers is under control? How long will we be able to manage the situation?

16:30

John Kinnaird: I cannot answer that question. It is way out of my league. We encourage farmers to talk to their neighbours as often as they can, even by telephone. There is a direct line to the Samaritans. The outbreak will have an immense impact on the mental well-being of many people, purely and simply because of the stress and strain that they are under.

The rest of Scotland is holding its breath, hoping that foot-and-mouth disease will not come to it. I am a farmer, too. I know what it is like. The precautions that we have taken are almost like a siege. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be living in the middle of it. It cannot be pleasant. Those living in the middle of it have to make some very hard decisions. We must consider further ahead than just the next six months. We have to consider what the consequences will be 12 or 18 months ahead.

The Convener: I will ask a question that relates to information that we got when we spoke to the Scottish Beef Council. It is noticeable that the prices of meat in the shops have risen quite significantly. At the same time, we are told, the prices that are being paid for the livestock that is being moved to abattoirs under licence have fallen quite significantly. What is happening to the market for livestock under the extreme restrictions that we have at the moment? Is there any prospect of prices improving during the restriction period?

John Kinnaird: That comes back to the old story that the farming community unfortunately does not co-operate well in the selling of its

products. We become price takers rather than price makers.

The Government must take some responsibility, even if that means starting another investigation into supermarket pricing. No way should the consumer pay more for their meat when the primary producer is getting less. Somewhere in the middle, large sums of money are disappearing.

However, we appreciate that a lot of costs have been added to abattoirs because of the increased haulage costs of one dedicated journey from farm to abattoir. The disposal of by-products from slaughterhouses is also a very expensive operation. The costs of that have gone up considerably in the past week.

Those matters need to be addressed, but it is wrong that all the costs should come back to the primary producer. We are the ones at the sharp end. We produce the goods to a high standard. We can be proud of that standard and consumers can relate to it.

If much of the increase in price has come from imported produce, I have to ask why. A fortnight ago, imported produce was swamping and depressing our markets. All of a sudden, it is increasing the price of meat for the consumer. That has to be wrong. That must be addressed and rebalanced.

The Convener: If there are no further questions, I thank John Kinnaird for coming along and talking to us today. Without a doubt, the committee will return to foot-and-mouth disease, but we hope that we will be able to return to it looking back at a successful eradication of the disease from Scotland and then considering the aftermath.

That brings us to the end of the meeting. As the purpose of the meeting was largely to inform the committee about the outbreak, I do not believe that it would be of any value for us to discuss what we have heard today. We will consider it at a later stage.

Meeting closed at 16:34.

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