

Foot and Mouth Disease: Lessons Learned Inquiry Ramblers' Association's submission

The Ramblers' Association (RA) recommends that a protocol be drawn up on action to be taken relating to access to the countryside during any future major animal disease outbreak.

Points to be covered in the protocol

- C CLOSURE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE MUST NOT BE ALLOWED AGAIN
- C Walking is popular and important to health and to the economy in rural areas. It is essential that if foot and mouth recurs or another major animal disease outbreak happens, only paths and other land with access in the immediate vicinity of the outbreak and which significantly increase the risk of the spread of the disease should be closed. The closure of the countryside during the 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak was unnecessary and had a detrimental impact on the lives of many people.

- C GUIDANCE FOR THE PUBLIC
- C The recent foot-and-mouth outbreak demonstrated that the public willingly follow guidance on minimizing the risk of spreading major animal diseases. A blanket closure of the countryside was not necessary in 2001, and will not be necessary in the event of any future outbreak. Clear guidance for the public on access to the countryside should be issued and well-publicized at the beginning of a future major animal disease outbreak.

- C INFORMATION PROVISION AND THE NATIONAL ACCESS DATABASE
- C Information on any closures should be provided and co-ordinated by central government. It must be accurate and easily accessible by the public. The creation of a National Access Database will enable accurate information on the closure of paths and other land with access to be maintained and communicated quickly to the public in the event of a future major animal disease outbreak.

- C ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES
- C If local authorities are given extra powers to close paths outside the vicinity of an animal disease outbreak, those closures should last for no more than two weeks, and should be renewed only with the permission of the Minister following proper determination of the case.

- C MISLEADING NOTICES
- C Displaying notices which imply that paths are shut when they are not, or which ask the public not to walk, must be declared illegal and their removal must be enforced.

- C REOPENING OF PATHS AND ACCESS LAND OVER PREVIOUSLY INFECTED PREMISES
- C Infected premises should be disinfected within six weeks, and information on the locations of the outbreaks and the progress of the disinfection process should be easily available to

the public.

CLOSURE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE MUST NOT BE ALLOWED AGAIN

Walking is the most popular sporting activity in the UK. It is good for fitness and physical and mental health, and it is the most sustainable form of transport, with paths providing safe routes to school and work. Recreational walkers generate billions of pounds of business for rural areas. The closure of the countryside during foot and mouth had a significant impact on many people and businesses and must not be allowed to happen again.

According to an *ICM* research survey, 77% of UK adults say they walk for pleasure at least once a month and 62% say that walking is their main form of exercise¹. Walking has remained the most popular physical activity that is carried out for leisure over the four General Household Surveys conducted in the last 20 years.

Walkers generate billions of pounds of business for rural areas. In 1998 over 20% of visitors to the countryside pursued activities such as walking, field study, and cycling. These totalled 26 million tourist trips generating spending of £2.7 billion.² In Wales alone, £77 million and 4250 jobs are generated by walking and mountaineering in rural Wales.³ And the turnover of UK outdoor manufacturers and retailers, many of whom bring employment to towns and cities, is substantial. The turnover in 2000 was £750 million⁴.

Strong scientific evidence supports the many benefits to health of regular walking. Studies show that walking can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, lower blood pressure, reduce high cholesterol and improve blood lipid profile, reduce body fat, enhance mental well being, increase bone density and help to prevent osteoporosis, reduce the risk of cancer of the colon, reduce the risk of non insulin dependant diabetes, help to control body weight, help osteoarthritis, and help flexibility and co-ordination hence reducing the risk of falls.

The estimated national revenue loss caused by foot and mouth in 2001 is almost £5 billion.⁵ An estimated 20,000 to 30,000 jobs in the tourism industry were lost because of foot and mouth.⁶ A report commissioned by the Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber shows that in the Yorkshire region alone, the estimated loss to the tourist industry between March and May 2001 was £34.8 million. The report finds that "Consultations have revealed that the closure of the footpaths is the single largest factor impacting on rural tourism, exacerbated by media coverage which has led to confusion amongst consumers as to the state of the countryside in the wake of foot and mouth."⁷

In any future major animal disease outbreak, the closure of paths and other areas of land with access should be allowed only in the immediate vicinity of an outbreak. If it is again impossible at the outset of the outbreak to establish immediately which livestock are likely to have come into contact with the infection, and it is again necessary to close blanket areas of the countryside until this information is gathered, closures should be limited to paths which cross, and those other areas of land with access which cover, enclosures containing animals susceptible to the disease; and the closures should be time-limited to a period no more than sufficient for central government scientists to have established the location of animals likely to be infected. The government should involve recreational user groups at the earliest opportunity in response to an outbreak.

In the foot-and-mouth outbreak of 2001, different local authorities were using different signing systems. In the event of a future major animal disease outbreak, closure signs should be standard and difficult to forge. Consideration should be given to signing reopened paths, and unaffected

paths, also with standard signs. Guidance should be issued to the public so they can easily recognise the official signs. Closure signs should be placed where they are clearly visible at the boundary of the closure area. In the vicinity of closure areas, it would also be useful for information signs to be displayed on open paths where paths intersect with metalled roads. These information signs should notify the public that paths ahead are closed and give a map of the closure area and the paths affected.

In areas where paths are closed, an emergency speed limit of 20mph should be placed on all class 'C' roads and below.

People and organizations which allow permissive access should be informed of the minimal risks of walkers spreading the animal disease, and encouraged to keep access to their properties open unless they are within the immediate vicinity of an outbreak.

GUIDANCE FOR THE PUBLIC

At the beginning of the 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak, the public was told to keep out of the countryside. Pictures in the media showed the countryside deserted. Walkers were praised by government ministers and senior officials of the NFU for observing closures, and the co-operation from the general public was acknowledged by the Scottish Executive's Justice Minister, Jim Wallace, at the introduction of the Land Reform Bill.

When paths were opened, the public followed the guidelines issued by the government. During the seven months of the 2001 outbreak, not one of the 2030 cases of foot and mouth was attributed to a walker. In the event of any future outbreak of foot and mouth, the following clear guidance, based on the 2001 guidance, should be issued to the public and made widely available in the press and other media:

- don't go on farmland if you have handled livestock in the previous 7 days
- don't touch farm animals and keep dogs on a lead where they are present
- if you step in dung, remove it before leaving the field
- don't use paths with a government closed notice displayed

If government scientists considered this guidance inappropriate for major animal disease outbreaks other than foot and mouth, recreational user groups should be consulted on the guidance at the earliest opportunity.

INFORMATION PROVISION AND A NATIONAL ACCESS DATABASE

Reliable information on what was open and what was closed during the 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak was hard to come by. The Countryside Agency and the Countryside Council for Wales set up websites with links to local authority information on access to the countryside, but the information provided on the authority websites varied in quality and accuracy. The Ramblers' Association - a charity with limited resources - regularly telephoned local authorities and other bodies and assembled the most comprehensive GB-wide information service on access to the countryside available at that time. Thousands of inquiries were handled by the Association.

Publicity in January 2002 about the UK being foot-and-mouth free gave some members of the public the misleading impression that all paths and other areas of land with access were again open. The Countryside Agency's foot-and-mouth website was scaled down and links to local authority sites removed while hundreds of closures remained.

In the event of any future outbreak, consistent and accurate information on closures in the countryside should be well publicized by a central agency from the beginning of the outbreak until the last path or other area of land with access is reopened. The information should be easily obtainable for most people in a form that is useful to walkers and suits their needs. It should be comprehensive, with details of the situation on all rights of way, permissive and promoted routes. The service should include, as a minimum: a website with GIS mapping showing the location of every closed path and access area, and a telephone helpline. Care should be taken not to give the public the impression that paths and access areas are again open when they are not.

The Countryside Agency and DEFRA in England; and, in Wales, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Wales Tourist Board, and the Forestry Commission, are investigating the feasibility of creating, one each for England and Wales, a National Access Database which will contain information on all types of access, including public rights of way, access land (as defined in Part I of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000), and other land covered by access agreements and formal access arrangements. We are urging central government to give full financial backing to these initiatives.

In the event of any future outbreak, such a database would help with the management and distribution of information on access to the countryside. Local highway authorities should be required to maintain their definitive maps of public rights of way on GIS systems compatible with the National Access Database. The Countryside Agency and the Countryside Council for Wales should be required to maintain the conclusive maps of access land in a likewise compatible form. The National Access Database should be made easily accessible to the public by means of a website, together with information about any current closures.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Before the 2001 outbreak, the legislation available to close footpaths during a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak was contained in the Animal Health Act 1981, supplemented by the Foot-and-Mouth Disease Order 1983. This was further supplemented by various orders during 2001 which gave additional powers to local authorities to close rights of way.

These additional powers were used so extensively by local authorities that the countryside became a 'no go' area. 90% of local authorities closed almost all rural paths in England and Wales. People couldn't go for a walk in the countryside, even though only 25% of local authorities suffered an outbreak, and the risk of walkers spreading the disease was described by DEFRA as "minute" and "vanishingly small"⁸. The government issued successive pieces of guidance to local authorities on the reopening of paths from 28 March onwards, yet it wasn't until June that 50% of paths were again open. Different local authorities were using different criteria for opening paths. Some authorities retained unnecessary closure areas for so long that in July the government revoked blanket closures in all but a handful of authorities. Lincolnshire, for example, a county which had not one outbreak, doggedly resisted pressure to open rights of way until forced to by government.

If the Minister awards local authorities the power to close paths and other areas of land with access which are not within 3km of an outbreak, this should be done exceptionally, and the closures should last for no more than two weeks, and be renewed only with the permission of the Minister. Where authorities are permitted to make exceptional closures outside of 3km around an outbreak, the criteria used by the Minister to make the decisions should be available to the public. Likewise, if the Minister decides to renew the closure, the public should know the criteria used to come to the decision to renew. In Scotland, consideration should be given to expanding the State Veterinary Service so that responsibility for closing areas would lie entirely in the hands of the

Service.

If local authorities choose to set up special liaison committees to assist them during the outbreak, recreational user groups should be invited to join these committees as well as those representing farming and business interests.

MISLEADING NOTICES

Although paths were being reopened from 28 March onwards, many notices implying that paths were officially closed when they were not, or which asked the public not to walk particular paths, remained in place. Even now, when less than 1% of paths remain closed, the Ramblers' Association is still receiving reports of such signs. These signs deter people from using paths which legally are open. As a consequence, people can't enjoy the countryside, and businesses which rely on people visiting the countryside, suffer.

Displaying misleading notices likely to deter use on public rights of way in England and Wales is an offence under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. It is also an offence to place unauthorised signs or marks within a highway under section 132 of the Highways Act 1980. The government should instruct highway authorities to use their powers to have unauthorised signs removed and if necessary provide funding to highway authorities affected to achieve this.

In Scotland, the proposed legislation on a right of responsible access to the countryside should give local authorities a similar duty to remove misleading notices.

REOPENING OF PATHS AND ACCESS LAND OVER PREVIOUSLY INFECTED PREMISES

At the time of writing, it has been six months since an outbreak in North Yorkshire and nine months in Lancashire, but many paths remain shut because of a delay in the disinfection process. In the event of a future major animal disease outbreak, any necessary disinfection procedures should be standardized and performed quickly, within six weeks of the infection being identified. Paths and other land with access should immediately be reopened once the land is free of infection, including those sections over farmyards and through buildings. An owner of land crossed by a right of way or which contains other land with access should not be able to refuse disinfection for her/his land. Information about the location of outbreaks and the disinfection progress at the affected premises should be made available to the public.

The Ramblers' Association

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¹ ICM, February 2000

² 'Foot and Mouth Disease: the state of the English Countryside', Countryside Agency, 2001

³ 'The Economic Value of Walking in Rural Wales' by Professor Peter Midmore of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, March 2000

⁴ Outdoor Industries Association, *Outdoor Factsheet*, January 2001.

⁵ English Tourism Council, quoted in *The Guardian*, 18 February 2002

⁶ 'Foot and Mouth Disease: the state of the English Countryside', Countryside Agency, 2001

⁷ 'The Impact of Foot and Mouth Disease on the Yorkshire and Humber Economy', ECOTEC Research and Consulting Limited

⁸ 'Veterinary Risk Assessment No 4', MAFF, 23 May 2001