Subject: Measures against foot and mouth disease

At the time of the foot and mouth epidemic, public opinion did not approve of the mass destruction of infected and suspect animals.

Can the Commission answer the following:

1. What will it do to prevent and bring under control the risk of infection with foot and mouth disease within the EU?

2. What progress has been made with the development of new methods of testing and vaccines, and does the Commission intend to speed up the development of these products?

3. How much has the foot and mouth epidemic so far directly cost the Commission and what is the cost-benefit ratio — particularly in rural areas — of different methods of tackling the disease?

4. Which budget headings does the Commission intend to use to combat and prevent any future epidemic?

5. What action programme will it propose for combating foot and mouth disease and bringing it under control in future?

Answer given by Mr Byrne on behalf of the Commission

(13 March 2002)

With reference to the questions raised by the Honourable Member, the Commission would also like to draw attention to the replies it gave to Written Question E-1143/01 by M. Meijer (1) and E-1195/01 by the Honourable Member and Mrs van der Laan (2), which include information on the Community approach to the control of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) and on the review of this policy by the Commission. In particular, it should be pointed out that an International Conference on the prevention and control of FMD was organised jointly by the Belgian Council Presidency and the Commission in Brussels on 12-13 December 2001 in order to draw the first conclusions from the 2001 epidemic.

FMD is an exotic disease to the Community and the absence of disease and the virus and the international recognition thereof is the best animal health status for the operation of the single market. The FMD free status of the Community without vaccination was re-established by the International Animal Health Office (OIE) on 21 January 2002.

However, virus introduction cannot be ruled out completely, therefore the Community policy has always been directed at the elimination of the major risks, i.e. to prevent the introduction of the virus via imports of live susceptible animals and untreated products. This is ensured by strict Community animal health conditions for imports of animals and animal products and the controls on such imports carried out by the Member States at the Veterinary Border Inspections Posts.

It is noteworthy that none of the outbreaks recorded since the adoption of Council Directive 90/423/EEC of 26 June 1990 amending Directive 85/511/EEC introducing Community measures for the control of foot-and-mouth disease, Directive 64/432/EEC on animal health problems affecting intra-Community trade in bovine animals and swine and Directive 72/462/EEC on health and veterinary inspection problems upon importation of bovine animals and swine and fresh meat or meat products from third countries (3) have been attributed to legal imports in accordance with Community or national rules of any of the above commodities. The Commission is currently working on the reinforcement of controls at outside borders and on provisions relating to stipulating the controls of personal luggage of travellers carrying small quantities of animal products.
A second defence line must be to minimise the probability of contact between susceptible animals and the virus. Community legislation has been adopted to ban the feeding of swill to pigs. In addition it is the responsibility of the farming community to ensure the day to day biosecurity of holdings keeping susceptible animals.

Equally the Community as a whole and each Member State in particular must be prepared to meet the challenges of a possible outbreak with swift, decisive and effective control measures. For this purpose Member States are obliged to prepare and exercise contingency plans and the Commission has carried out controls on the implementation of these plans in practice. An essential part of this preparedness is the availability of appropriate diagnostic facilities in networked national laboratories, procedures in place to establish national and local crisis centres and last, but not least, the availability of sufficient and effective vaccines for emergency vaccination. The availability of vaccines is assured through the Community antigen and vaccine bank and national vaccine banks in some, but not all, Member States.

However, the most important element is the adherence of farmers to the legal obligation to notify without delay any suspicion of disease as well as close and frequent contact between the farmers and their veterinary practitioners. To this end education and training is needed, which is the responsibility of the Member States. Member States must in particular ensure strict controls on animal movement. Pending the adoption of appropriate amendments to the relevant Directives, the restrictions currently in place with regard to the movement of small ruminants provide for improved animal health conditions for sheep and goats. Both species were heavily implicated in the widely spread outbreaks of FMD in the United Kingdom.

In the case of an outbreak, legal provisions must be in place to carry out disease control measures. Community measures for the control of FMD are laid down in Council Directive 85/511/EEC of 18 December 1985 which provides minimum requirements to be completed and adapted to the specific epidemiological situation by the adoption of protective measures. These measures include, first of all, the stamping out and safe destruction of infected animals and contact animals likely to become contaminated or infected, controls on the movement of susceptible animals and products thereof, cleansing and disinfection and, where the need arises, emergency protective or suppressive vaccination.

Failures in any element of the above chain may lead to an epidemic spread of the virus and therefore a complex and integrated approach is necessary to improve the Community FMD control measures with the appropriate daily human and financial resources on a daily basis.

The Commission is currently working on strengthening relevant Community legislation particularly in the field of imports, animal movement and trade, and disease control measures. However, any Commission legislative initiative can only be as effective if the agreed provisions are effectively implemented and enforced by the Member States.

2. Modern highly purified vaccines against FMD allow the use of discriminatory tests to distinguish vaccinated from infected animals on a herd basis. While suitable tests have been around for research purposes and for small-scale surveillance for many years. The first commercial and reproducible test was not available until the beginning of October 2001.

Even in this case, the test still needs final validation and even more importantly, international recognition. The principles of tests for the detection of antibodies against non-structural proteins were described for the first time in the Manual of Standards of the OIE in August 2001, however, without a link to the Animal Health Code. The Commission, who has been supporting the development of such discriminatory tests for many years, was the first international organisation to purchase a substantial quantity of the recently developed test kits for use under field conditions in a surveillance programme in Turkey and adjacent regions of the Balkans. In addition, a programme is to be finalised for the completion of validation data achieved under laboratory conditions, a technically demanding exercise, bearing in mind the need for experimental infection of animals under high-containment conditions available only at designated places in Europe. Field experiments can only be done under certain conditions in selected third countries.

However, emergency vaccination will be a more feasible option only if trade restrictions can be limited for example by recognition of a discriminatory test. For this reason the Commission is in contact with the OIE.
to obtain this recognition and the necessary amendments in the Animal Health Code laying down the animal health conditions for international trade. The FMD and other Epizootics Commission of the OIE discussed the use of discriminatory tests at its meeting of 21-25 January 2002 and will forward a proposal to the General Session in May 2002 which would make emergency vaccination in combination with a discriminatory test a viable option in disease control.

3. As of 14 January 2002, compensation for farmers affected by FMD is estimated by Member States at an amount of more than €2,8 billion. More than 94% is for farmers in the United Kingdom.

The eligible amount for compensation by the Community will probably be lower. It will depend on checks on the implementation of the legislation and determination of the eligible expenditure. The Community finances 60% of the eligible amount.

4. It is difficult to predict how the budget could be linked to the control and the prevention of possible future outbreaks.

Current practice is that the European contribution for the compensation of farmers is based on real expenditure in the Member States. The preliminary draft budget (PDB) and the rectifying letter are based on estimated data linked to real outbreaks. It is impossible to predict when and where an outbreak will take place.

5. At the end of last year, the Council adopted a general ban on swill feeding. Whilst such a general ban of swill feeding eases the need for controls on swill in the Member States, it must be acknowledged that it cannot exclude illegal swill feeding which has had caused several outbreaks of classical swine fever and FMD in the past in various Member States.

The Commission is also working on import rules for small quantities of animal products for private use, which would require additional controls for personal luggage at ports of entry into the Community.

International co-operation in FMD controls, in particular in Turkey and adjacent countries, was the subject of a tripartite meeting between the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), the OIE and the Community at the FAO Headquarters on 6 and 7 February 2002. The Commission’s draft programme for such co-operation was welcomed and supported by the international institutions.


WRITTEN QUESTION E-3583/01
by Markus Ferber (PPE-DE) to the Commission
(8 January 2002)

Subject: Tacis newsletter

Under the new Commission framework programme, the Tacis newsletter produced by Team Europe, Carrefours and Infopoints is to appear in English and French only. This places around a quarter of EU citizens, with German as their mother tongue, at a disadvantage compared with the far smaller number of English and French-speakers. If it is to be possible to reach a broad section of the public — which is the aim of Carrefours and Infopoints — documents must be available in their mother tongue.

Why is the Tacis newsletter produced only in English and French?

When will the Commission translate the Tacis newsletter into other languages?