

ARD-07-01(min)

ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Date: Tuesday 24 April 2001

Time: 11:00 am to 1:00 pm

Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly for Wales

Attendance:

EPT Committee Members:

Richard Edwards, Chair of Joint Meeting	Preseli Pembrokeshire
Mick Bates (also member of ARD)	Montgomeryshire
David Davies	Monmouth
Geraint Davies	Rhondda
Sue Essex, Minister for Environment	Cardiff North
John Griffiths (also member of ARD)	Newport East
Helen Mary Jones	Llanelli
Tom Middlehurst	Alyn and Deeside
Karen Sinclair	Clwyd South
Rhodri Glyn Thomas	Carmarthen East and Dinefwr

ARD Committee Members:

Glyn Davies	Mid and West Wales
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Jocelyn Davies
Delyth Evans
Carwyn Jones, Minister for Rural Affairs
Elin Jones
Peter Rogers
Janet Ryder

South Wales East
Mid and West Wales
Bridgend
Ceredigion
North Wales
North Wales

HSS Committee Members:

Kirsty Williams

Brecon and Radnorshire

Officials:

Gareth Jones
Tony Edwards
Bob Macey
Harvard Prosser
Rob Rustage
Ronnie Alexander
Dr Ruth Hall

Head, Foot & Mouth Operations
Chief Veterinary Officer (MAFF)
Head of Environment Division
Environment Science Advisor
Environment Division
Chief Environment Health Advisor
Chief Medical Officer

In Attendance:

David Walker
Alun James
Paul Loveluck
Dr David Parker
Johnston McNeil

Water Manager, Wales, (Environment Agency)
Environment Protection Manager, Wales, (Environment Agency)
Chief Executive, Countryside Council for Wales
Countryside Council for Wales
Chief Executive, Intervention Board

David Younger

Manager of Welfare Disposal Scheme,
Intervention Board

Secretariat:

Adrian Crompton

Committee Clerk (ARD)

Vaughan Watkin

Deputy Committee Clerk (EPT)

Opening Remarks from Chair

0.1 The Chair welcomed members, officials and members of the public to the meeting, and thanked officials from the Environment Agency, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Intervention Board for attending at such short notice.

0.2 He explained that the meeting had been called to discuss environmental issues related to the handling of the foot and mouth outbreak.

Item 1: Apologies, substitutions and declaration of interests

1.1 Apologies had been received from Huw Lewis.

2. The Chair invited members to declare any interests under Standing Order 4.5. These were as follows:-

- Mick Bates - partner in a farming business.
- Glyn Davies - farmer
- Peter Rogers -farmer
- Elin Jones - relatives with a farming business
- Kirsty Williams - an interest in a farming business
- Geraint Davies - member of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and a pharmacist.

Item 2: Environmental aspects of the foot and mouth crisis

2.1 The Minister for Rural Affairs gave a brief progress report. It had been agreed on 26 March that, in addition to culling animals from infected farms, animals on contiguous farms would also be culled. The resulting disposal backlog of culled animals had now been removed.

2.2 Blood testing of animals in the Black Mountains had proved to be negative to date. As a result of this, the eradication of backlog and the fewer infected premises being experienced, the need for the Eppynt site had been removed.

2.3 The Minister highlighted three points that were distinctive to Wales and had improved the efficiency of the handling of the disease – the availability of information points, on-farm veterinary assessments of contiguous sites and follow-up contact to farmers whose livestock had been destroyed.

2.4 He stressed the need to avoid complacency and appealed to farmers especially to remain cautious. Bio-security was still essential and clothing should be changed and disinfected when appropriate.

2.5 The Minister for the Environment explained that she led on access and environmental issues and was working closely with the Minister for Health and Social Services on implications for public health. She paid tribute to all those involved in the management of foot and mouth disease in Wales process.

2.6 Disposal options had to take account of the need to avoid leaving carcasses on land where they could pose health problems, avoid transporting infected carcasses, limits on availability of rendering facilities, limiting potential BSE infection, local topography and the proximity of population. The favoured hierarchy of disposal options was, firstly, rendering followed by incineration in authorised and regulated incinerators, landfill at appropriate licensed sites, burning on the farm and burial on the farm. It was essential to ensure speedy disposal of carcasses but also to ensure that air, water and soil monitoring arrangements were put in place. To this end, a monitoring sub-group had been established in collaboration with the Minister for Health and Social Services, local authorities, health authorities and others. As an early task for this group she had asked for a complete record of all burn sites used.

2.7 Before Easter, the Minister had produced revised guidance on access.

2.8 The Chair thanked the Ministers for their reports and invited questions on two broad areas of concern - Mynydd Eppynt and the operation of the welfare cull. He appealed to members to keep their questions brief and to concentrate on environmental and public health issues only.

2.9 In discussion of the choice of the Eppynt site:-

- It was suggested that the credibility of the Assembly had been damaged by the choice of the site and the subsequent change of policy. Was this due to pressure from local residents and the leeching of pollutant from the pit? The Minister for Rural Affairs responded that the pit was no longer needed as the number of carcasses for disposal was now lower than previously anticipated. The Environment Agency had recommended the site as the most suitable available although subsequent investigation had revealed unexpectedly large fissures in the rock which explained the leechate discovered in a monitoring borehole;
- The Minister for Rural affairs was asked if the site had been chosen for administrative convenience prior to the Environment Agency's assessment and for details of the steps taken to deal with seepage from the pit and the environmental impact of burning the

carcasses already there. In response, he said that the Environment Agency had been involved in assessing the five proposed sites before the site had been chosen. Once leachate had been discovered, carcasses had been moved onto a temporary membrane and fluid pumped out and taken away for treatment. Carcasses in the pit would now be burnt. The principal concern over dioxin contamination from burning was its potential impact on the food chain. The Food Standards Agency and the Environment Agency were liaising on monitoring the site for traces of dioxins in the herbage or soil whilst air quality monitoring was also taking place. The data gathered would help to firm up estimates currently generated by computer modelling and then be assessed against World Health Organisation guidelines. Members were asked to note that dioxin analysis was not straightforward and results would take some time to produce.

- The Minister for Rural Affairs was asked to make the independent hydrology report on the site available to members. He agreed to seek agreement from MAFF to which the report had been made.

2.10 Opening discussion on the Welfare Livestock Disposal Scheme, the Minister for Rural Affairs outlined the three types of cull taking place – the cull of animals on infected premises (with carcasses disposed of on premise or rendered), the cull of animals on contiguous farms (with carcasses disposed of on farm or the Epynt) and the welfare Scheme. Here the Assembly's role was to approve landfill sites for disposal. Day to day management of the scheme was the responsibility of the Intervention Board. Five disposal sites had so far been approved with three more under discussion. At each, scheme disposal could account for no more than 5% of the total volume of waste handled by the site.

2.11 In discussion, the following points were made:

- The Minister had yet to use his power to direct local authorities to allow landfill sites to be used but would do so if necessary;
- Only uninfected carcasses would be disposed of on landfill sites with vets inspecting animals before slaughter for visible signs of infection;
- In waste management terms, animal carcasses were not particularly difficult to manage. Their content was known and approved sites were chosen on the basis of having suitable leachate, gas and odour management systems in place;
- The Intervention Board explained that animals were only slaughtered under the Welfare Scheme once a disposal site had been identified. Hence, carcasses should be moved away from farms immediately. The Chief Executive said he would investigate specific incidents raised by members of carcasses remaining on farms;
- It was suggested to the Intervention Board that the issues of disposal were predictable and should have been addressed before the scheme began operation. In response, the Chief Executive said that the number of animals due for slaughter under the scheme was broadly equivalent to that killed on infected and contiguous sites. The speed with which the scheme could operate was limited by the availability of disposal sites and, since the infected and contiguous animal culls had first call, the speed of the welfare cull was being limited by the availability of landfill capacity. The Board recognised its duty to maximise the disposal

capacity available after taking advice from the Environment Agency on their waste management suitability;

- Members suggested that the number of animals registered for slaughter on the scheme would be reduced if current movement restrictions were relaxed. The Minister for Rural affairs reminded members that this was a decision for MAFF but agreed that he wished to see such a relaxation as soon as possible and prudent. The coverage of infected areas was a matter for the State Veterinary Service with which the Chief Veterinary Officer was in regular dialogue;
- Once slaughtering and disposal availability had been secured, farms were prioritised under the Scheme on the basis of animal welfare;
- The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Intervention Board said that the compensation rates offered under the Welfare Scheme made it an attractive option for some farmers. This was disputed by several members;
- The Chief Veterinary Officer explained how carcass infectivity reduced after slaughter as no viral plumes were produced through exhalation and changes in acidity levels within the carcass destroyed the virus. It was possible, though for the virus to continue in bone marrow. He also confirmed that the transportation of clean animals for disposal through infected areas did not raise disease management concerns;
- The Intervention Board agreed to write to Peter Rogers on the issue of eligibility for slaughter premium for animals killed under the scheme.

2.12 In discussion of the environmental consequences of burning carcasses, the Minister for the Environment agreed that the continued monitoring of sites was essential. She would take guidance from the Environment Agency, Food Standards Agency and others over how long this should continue. MAFF had experimented with small-scale tests to maximise the efficiency of carcass burns, but none on the scale of the Eppynt disposal.

2.13 The Chief Executive of the Countryside Council for Wales emphasised the importance, from an economic and health point of view, of reopening access to the countryside as soon as possible.

2.14 Both Ministers also agreed that it would be important to learn lessons from the way in which the outbreak had been managed.

2.15 The Chair thanked everyone for their contribution and closed the meeting.

Committee Secretariat April 2001