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Committee Clerk

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Deputy Committee Clerk

Item 1: Apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

1.1 Apologies were received from Huw Lewis. The Chair declared an interest as a farmer and that his farm was close to a number of confirmed cases. Mick Bates said that he was a partner in a farming business and Peter Rogers that he was a farmer.

1.2 The Chair said he had received requests to discuss the GM field trials but felt it would not be appropriate to do so because the Presiding Officer had agreed to the meeting being held to discuss foot and mouth disease. The Minister confirmed that he intended to recall the GM Strategy Group for a meeting probably on the following Wednesday.

Item 2: Foot and Mouth Disease

2.1 The Minister said that the cull on Anglesey was nearing completion. The Epynt site continued to be used for the disposal of carcasses but there had been some difficulties. Over the weekend a lorry had travelled in the wrong direction towards Carmarthen. The contractor involved would no longer be used. Fluid that had leaked from a lorry carrying carcasses was a mixture of disinfectant and blood. The leak occurred because the lorry had not been packed properly. Procedures had since been amended and responsibilities clarified and the process was now under Army supervision.

2.2 The view was expressed that the use of the Epynt ranges to dispose of culled animals was not sensible in view of its proximity to the clean area of West Wales and the possible effect on tourism. It was however acknowledged that it was difficult to identify suitable sites. The Minister was asked a number of questions regarding the site and its suitability;

- what were his legal responsibilities in respect of the waste and the site? The Minister said that management of the site was the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and that the Environment Agency was responsible for monitoring environmental impact including water distribution and the geology of the site;
- what contact had been made with Carmarthenshire and Powys county councils? The Minister said that he had met the councils and both had asked how they could help. Stories that Powys was considering legal action had no basis;
- what alternative sites were available in Powys and on the Epynt? Powys County Council and the Army had been unable to identify any alternative sites for disposal. The Committee noted that five possible sites on the Epynt had been considered. The two chosen, for burial and burning, were the most suitable;
- where were the carcasses for disposal coming from? The Minister said that carcasses were coming from Powys and Monmouthshire from culls of stock from farms contiguous to

- confirmed outbreaks. No carcasses from confirmed cases were being brought to the site;
- was consideration being given to seeking a second opinion on the suitability of the Epynt site? The Minister said the decision to use the site had been taken after receiving advice from the Environment Agency, the Army, the State Veterinary Service and officials. The Environment Agency had statutory responsibility and it would not be appropriate to take advice from any other source;
 - the main concern of local people was that water supplies might be contaminated. The land around the site was very porous and many people obtained their water from springs. A bore hole close to the burial site had already been contaminated and more details were requested. The Minister said the issue of water run off was for the Environment Agency. Roger Thomas said that a very comprehensive monitoring regime was in place and would continue until 2013. Modelling work had taken account of the fissured nature of the rock but indicated that the site should be safe. Sub-surface water had contaminated a bore hole close to the burial pit and was being pumped out. Tests showed it to be dilute blood and body fluids. An assessment was being made and if necessary the pit would be sealed. Dye tracers were being added to the pit and their presence would be monitored in bore holes around the site. The Environment Agency remained confident that ground water would not be contaminated;
 - local people wanted to know what was happening at the site. Was it possible to allow community leaders to visit it? The Committee noted that a local liaison committee had been established and would be allowed to inspect the site in a controlled way. Efforts were also being made to improve the flow of information to local people;
 - how many animals had been disposed of at the site and what was its capacity? The Committee noted that 9,000 sheep and 1,100 cattle had been buried on the site. The site could take about 180,000 ewes.

2.3 The Minister was asked what was being done to identify alternative disposal sites. It was suggested that forestry land might be suitable. The Minister agreed that forestry land might be suitable and said that the Environment Agency was looking at sites in north Powys. If those were suitable, and after appropriate consultation they could be used if necessary. The Epynt site had been identified as the most suitable available and brought into operation so as to meet the deadlines of 24 hours for the slaughter of infected livestock and 48 hours for the cull of stock on contiguous farms. No site was ideal.

2.4 In view of the apparent difficulty in identifying enough lorries to transport culled stock to central disposal sites and the experience of the Môtina Airfield burial site the option of on farm disposal should be considered. The Minister said that burning and burial on farms would require environmental impact assessments. There were not enough qualified people to carry out such assessments and as a result the cull would be delayed. It was easier to organise transport to mass burial sites than to secure the plant and materials necessary for on site disposal. He added enough lorries were now available.

2.5 Concern was expressed about farmers suffering fodder shortages after the severe weather

earlier in the year. The Minister confirmed that he had raised the issue of fodder aid with other UK agriculture Ministers but had not gained sufficient support for it to be taken further. He pointed out that investment into flood defence was taking place to try to avoid any similar reoccurrence.

2.6 The Minister was asked about the effect of movement restrictions on dairy farmers needing to get cows into calf. He confirmed that bulls could be moved onto farms for this purpose but that subsequent on-farm movements were governed by MAFF restrictions. He was negotiating with MAFF on the issue. He was also taking steps to ease restrictions on artificial insemination in non-infected areas.

2.7 In discussion of the application of movement licences, a number of points were made:

- the Scottish Parliament had taken steps to ease movement restrictions in clean areas;
- flexibility was required in the application of long distance movement licences to holdings where part, but not all of the land bordered common land;
- some areas currently defined as common land were now, in fact, enclosed rather than open to shared grazing;
- it would be important to apply sympathetically licensing on welfare grounds when spring and summer grazing was required.

2.8 In response, the Minister confirmed that easing restrictions as in Scotland was not a power available to the Assembly and that he found this frustrating. He assured the committee that he would be as flexible as possible within the rules laid down by MAFF. The issue of common land had been discussed at length with the farming unions who had not been able to guarantee that all farmers would respect requests to avoid moving animals to land within one kilometre of common land. Farmers looking to move animals short distances were, therefore, required to apply for local licences.

2.9 The Minister was asked about reported instances of illegal movements. Some members expressed concern that such allegations were unfair and sought to shift responsibility to farmers rather than those managing control of the outbreak. The Minister said that the people most concerned about illegal movements were farmers themselves. Although many allegations were no more than rumour, he felt that their considerable number warranted further investigation.

2.10 Clarification of the testing regime was requested. The Chief Veterinary Officer explained that two types of test were in operation – a test for traces of virus in infected tissue and a blood test for antibodies. A negative result in either case was not conclusive evidence that the disease was not present. Tissue from an old lesion, for example, might not prove positive whilst the presence of antibodies depended on an animal having been infected for some time. Tests were only valid, therefore, on a flock or herd basis but not for individual animals. Inevitably, therefore, some animals slaughtered on the basis of clinical signs might not prove positive in initial laboratory tests.

2.11 The Minister was asked about the slaughter of sheep exported to France from the Brecon area on 31 January. Tests showed they had antibodies to foot and mouth. Did this mean the disease existed in the Brecon area before the first case had been confirmed. The Minister said he it did not and Tony Edwards said that the validity of the tests was being discussed with the French authorities.

2.12 Members expressed concern that the welfare cull scheme was not operating properly. In particular, the Minister was asked about the role of local authorities in the choice of disposal sites under the scheme. It was pointed out that easing the movement in infected areas of animals to slaughter would address many welfare problems.

2.13 The Minister agreed that the scheme was not operating as he would like but stressed that the scheme was the responsibility of the Intervention Board. He had expressed his concern at a meeting earlier in the week in Downing Street and undertook to continue to push for improvement whenever he could. He explained that local authorities would be consulted on possible disposal sites along with other relevant parties. The final decision, though, lay with the Minister after consultation and advice from the Environment Agency.

2.14 A number of other issues were raised:

- the Minister was asked about communication with farmers. He explained that the purpose of the letter in the previous day's Western Mail had been to inform farmers of the availability of various advice centres. More detail advice and information was being sent to farmers individually. Mobile advice centres in infection hot spots were also being used;
- livestock markets were suffering from loss of business. What could be done to help? The Minister said that businesses should contact the WDA in the first instance and he would offer as much support as possible;
- a case in Caerphilly had been confirmed and all animals now slaughtered. The Minister confirmed that an investigation into how the infection had reached the area was ongoing;
- in response to a question the Minister confirmed that guidance was still awaited from MAFF on when harvesting could take place on infected land;
- the Minister to consider the question of whether pheasants could be released for autumn shoots;
- the Minister confirmed that the Rural Partnership task group had met to consider longer term recovery plans for the rural economy. Cabinet responsibility was shared between the Minister himself (disease control) the Finance Minister (financial matters), the Minister for Economic Development (tourism and the rural economy) and the Environment Minister (access to the countryside).

2.15 The Chair thanked members, the Minister and officials for their attendance and closed the meeting.

