



Lawmakers see devastation caused by foot-and-mouth disease

by Ilene K. Grossman

One day last winter, Trevor and Penny sent their healthy-looking cattle out to pasture. Three hours later, the animals were drooling and could barely stand. They had contracted foot-and-mouth disease, a malady that has devastated many British farmers and a significant part of the country's economy.

Trevor and Penny's dairy farm was one of the sites visited by a group of Midwestern legislators who were guests of the British government for a week in October. Through their trip, lawmakers were able to learn firsthand the agricultural woes that can be caused by the outbreak of an infectious disease and also learned from peers in the United Kingdom about how governments should respond to such an outbreak.

Prior to Sept. 11, at least partly in reaction to reports from the United Kingdom, states had begun to investigate ways of preventing the accidental spread of diseases such as foot-and-mouth — or at least minimizing the impact. Now, officials must consider other possibilities in the new era of terrorism. That makes the recent lessons learned by British officials even more critical for state leaders in the Midwest to understand.

'Takes your breath away'

Although Trevor and Penny's animals had been slaughtered many months before, the dairy farm was still quarantined when legislators visited the farm, requiring the American visitors to put on several layers of protective clothing before they could enter the premises. The top layer of clothing and footwear they wore could not be taken off and were burned at the farm.

The scope of the devastation caused by the disease is readily apparent. A number of pastures, each of which would have had many animals grazing, were empty. "The death and destruction takes your breath away," says Republican Rep. Shari Weber of Herington, majority leader in the Kansas House. "So much of what you worked for your whole life disappears in an instant," she adds.

The first case of foot-and-mouth disease was confirmed on Feb. 20 and was traced back to a pig farm, where it was probably present for several weeks before being discovered. FMD causes sores in an animal's mouth and on its hooves, eventually making it difficult to stand or eat. The disease is particularly damaging because it is hard to identify in sheep, which, in the earliest stages, do not display the symptoms that are so readily observable in cattle. In the United Kingdom outbreak this year, sheep spread the disease to many additional animals before being diagnosed.

The British government eventually slaughtered more than 3.9 million animals. More than three million sheep were killed, while 600,000 cattle and smaller numbers of pigs, goats and deer were killed. Not all of these animals were

infected, but in order to stop the spread of foot-and-mouth, the government also slaughtered animals that had come into direct contact with infected animals, animals on premises that were contiguous to infected premises, and animals that were detected with some symptoms of FMD. When an infected farm was identified, officials were required to trace all recent movements on and off the premises by animals, people and farm machinery.

Once the animals were slaughtered, the disposal of so many carcasses proved to be extremely problematic. The government burned many of the animals, and the smoke and ash from the massive bonfires caused environmental problems in rural communities. But when the scope of the foot-and-mouth outbreak became apparent, the government had very few alternatives. "The logistics of destroying the animals and handling the illness was like a military operation," Weber adds.

The financial cost to the British economy has been massive. While final numbers are not yet tallied, the government expects to pay out an estimated \$1.8 billion to compensate farmers. Independent evaluators determined values for the animals before slaughter, and farmers were paid the full "pre-outbreak value" of their animals.

"The foot-and-mouth outbreak has been a disaster for British farming, but also for many other rural industries, particularly tourism," says Lord Larry Whitty, British minister for food and agriculture. "It has made us look at the way we farm and at the interdependency of different sectors. Farming contributes less than 1 percent of the UK's gross domestic product, but the outbreak and the restrictions and measures necessary to combat it have had a much wider effect than that figure would suggest."

The British government compensated the farmers for their animals, but because months can go by before farms are permitted to restock, many farmers had to live off that payment. Some farmers were able to make some additional money by helping with the cleanup of their farms. They will still have to come up with funds to purchase new stock. As a result, a number of farmers will not be able to afford to go back into business.

Prior to this year's outbreak, the last FMD diagnosis in Devon, England, was in 1967. Perhaps because the disease had not been seen in more than 30 years, a recent public inquiry found that the contingency plans in place were not comprehensive enough. Ian Hutchcroft,



As part of an early October trip to the United Kingdom, three Midwestern lawmakers visit a farm in Devon where animals were infected with foot-and-mouth disease. Pictured are (from left to right) Caroline Cracraft, British vice consul; Nebraska Sen. and Midwestern Legislative Conference chair DiAnna Schimek; Kansas House Majority Leader Shari Weber; Minnesota Sen. Linda Higgins; and the owner of the Devon farm. On their visit, which was organized with cooperation between the British government (which also provided the financial support) and The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Office, lawmakers traveled to Edinburgh to learn about the new Scottish National Parliament and meet members of the assembly. The group spent several days in London, meeting with government officials to learn more about British government policies and programs in such areas as health care, education and security.

sustainable development coordinator for the Devon County Council, says, "When you have been through a crisis like this, it does really show you the importance of contingency planning." In just six weeks, Devon put together a rural recovery plan that focuses on both long-term and short-term recovery strategies. It analyzes and addresses the structural problems of rural areas and rural regeneration and lays out strategies to assist in short-term recovery efforts.

Hutchcroft believes there are lessons to learn from this disaster. He recommends that government officials keep disaster plans updated and specific, be aware of the many risks out there, communicate and not be insular, and "nurture and value community leadership, which is most needed in a time of crisis." He emphasizes the importance of partnerships and networks to the recovery process. Keeping these lines of communication open with other organizations and interested parties is "all about good, modern government, and if you do that, it will help you respond to an emergency," he believes.

Weber was struck by some of these same observations. She has talked to Kansas officials since her return about how to respond to disasters such as foot-and-mouth disease. She believes government leaders need to plan what preventative measures they are likely to take. In addition, education is a key component because farmers and small-town veterinarians may well be at the frontlines of diagnosing and containing the disease.

Lord Whitty concludes: "This is a challenge that many other countries in the international community are also facing, and we will be looking at their solutions to see what we can learn. That sort of cooperation was one of the highlights of the fight against the disease. Hopefully the experience they gained here will make their countries less likely to experience what we did." ✨