

Britain: Foot -and-Mouth Returns

LONDON - Britain's beleaguered farming sector, already reeling from flooding earlier this year, is bracing itself for the results of a government investigation, expected soon, which will confirm the source of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease on a farm in southern Britain last week. Authorities are currently investigating whether Pirbright, a joint facility run by the Institute for Animal Health, the country's main research center for infectious diseases in livestock, and Merial Animal Health, jointly operated by Merck & Co.n

Both companies have strenuously denied that there was a bio-security breach. However, Merial Animal Health, which makes vaccines against the virus, has agreed to halt production while the government investigation is carried out. The results are important, as they will indicate the potential scale of the outbreak; if the source were the laboratories, it is likely to be more containable. The 2001 outbreak began with a pig farm in northern Britain, but rapidly spread across the country and onto the European mainland and was passed on to cows and sheep. The government's Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said that the strain was most similar to those used in international diagnostics laboratories and vaccine production, including at the Pirbright facility. The National Farmers Union expressed deep concern about the news, but a spokesman said that it was too early to comment on the potential impact of the outbreak. The priority should be on containing the outbreak, he said. Memories of the last outbreak in 2001, which cost the economy around 8.5 billion (\$17.3 billion) and devastated the country's farming community, prompted quick action from the government. A protection and surveillance zone was created around the farm in Guildford in Surrey, and approximately 120 cattle were killed as a precaution. In cooperation with the National Farmers Union, Britain has voluntarily suspended the export of meat, animal carcasses and milk out of the country, and imposed a ban of the movement of all livestock until the investigation concludes. Prime Minister Gordon Brown cut short his summer holiday to chair a meeting of the cabinet's emergency committee, last Friday. On Monday Brown met with representatives of the National Farmer's Union, which the organization's spokesman described as very constructive. Several foreign governments and the European Union, have announced a ban on British meat and livestock. So far the market has reacted with caution, choosing to wait for the results of the government inquiry. The FTSE 100 closed down just 34.90 points, or 0.6%, at 6189.40 points, largely dragged down by a slump in the U.S. at the end of last week, over concerns about the subprime market. Howard Archer, chief British economist at Global Insight said he expected the economic impact of the latest outbreak to be minimal. Agriculture contributes just 1.0% to the country's Gross Domestic Product, and so far only a very small area of the country has been affected. Obviously, if the disease spreads, the impact will increase, but even then it should be pretty limited assuming that a lot of lessons have been learned from six years ago, Archer said.

About the Author

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