

Foot and mouth Country on alert



The foot-and-mouth disease alert couldn't dampen the enthusiasm of thousands of vintage tractor fans yesterday. More than 2,212 vintage tractor models from 22 countries rumbled through the Co Louth town of Cooley. The seaside town broke the record with 71 more vintage models than the previous tally of 2,141.

Farmers rage at suspected source of latest FMD outbreak

Duncan Gardham and Brendan Carlin

BRITISH farmers spoke of their anger and frustration last night after an ageing government research facility and its commercial partner were identified as the most likely source of the foot and mouth outbreak.

The National Farmers' Union said it was "deeply concerned" to hear that the virus may have originated from the Pirbright site and added: "Livestock farmers throughout the country will be in a state of anger and amazement to think that a site concerned with animal health may have allowed this terrible virus to get into our farming stock."

Frustration

Kevin Pearce, head of food and farming at the NFU, said: "I have been talking to farmers today and it is fair to say there has been a mixture of frustration, concern and some anger."

There were also growing questions last night over the British government's handling of the latest outbreak.

The Pirbright facility suspected of being the source

of the outbreak was not part of the initial protection zone despite its proximity to the infected cattle.

Sir Brian Follett, who conducted a government inquiry into the 2001 outbreak, said he had recommended in his report that it should be updated.

He said he considered the containment facilities needed modernising and extending.

Pressure

Last night the crisis risked turning into a party political row. In a sign that David Cameron was determined to put the government under pressure, the Tory leader reminded ministers that they were warned five years ago that the institute's facilities were "shabby and not up to standard".

"If it turns out that the virus was released either from the Institute for Animal Health in Pirbright or from the next-door lab at Merial... it will be astonishing news, because the organisations responsible for stopping things like foot and mouth will effectively be responsible for starting it," he said. (© The Daily Telegraph)