

Date : 22 March 2005
No : 64/05
Contact : James Withers
Telephone : 0131 472 4006
Email : james.withers@nfus.org.uk

EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 HOURS WEDNESDAY 23 MARCH

98% OF ILLEGAL MEAT IMPORTS ESCAPE UK CONTROLS

NFU Scotland believes that far greater resources must be devoted to tackling the massive problem of illegal meat imports. NFU Scotland has welcomed the progress being made by Customs in tracking illegal imports, however has highlighted that seizures by the agency only represent the tip of the iceberg.

A report published today (Wednesday 23 March) by the National Audit Office has outlined the action needed to improve UK controls on illegal imports, widely believed to be the cause of the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001 which cost the UK economy £8 billion.

According to estimates, confiscations of illegal animal products still amount to only two per cent of the amount getting through. There also appears to be a lack of understanding of the scale of the problem. The Veterinary Laboratories Agency estimate the total amount of illegal imports at between 4,400 tonnes and 29,000 tonnes a year.

Whilst UK spending on import controls compares favourably with other EU member states, the UK still lags well behind Australia and New Zealand, which have remained free of major livestock diseases. The report included the following findings:

- Australia spends approximately £3.15 per incoming passenger on import controls, New Zealand spends £2.50. Great Britain spends only 25 pence.
- Australia detects 22 illegal items for every 2,000 passengers entering the country compared to one item per 2,000 passengers in Great Britain.
- Australia prosecutes approximately 50 individuals a year, compared with just six in the last two years in the UK.

NFUS Vice President David Mitchell said:

“There is absolutely no doubt that there have been improvements since Customs took over the responsibility for import controls in April 2003. We welcome the news that the number of seizures of illegal imports has doubled to nearly 15,000, but this is an indication of the size of the problem. There is far more that needs to be done. The introduction of specialised x-ray equipment and the extension of the dog teams should be the start of this.

“There are 27 million passengers entering through 28 different UK airports every year. On top of that we 140 million tonnes of freight arriving at 42 seaports and 24 airports. Customs can’t eliminate the risk, but they can reduce it from the present unacceptable levels. Some of the controls on passengers entering New Zealand are extremely effective, are low cost and should be introduced here. Government should bear in mind that even a doubling of £7 million Customs budget pales in comparison to the £8 billion cost of the last imported disease.”

EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 HOURS WEDNESDAY 23 MARCH