

# **Is Foot and Mouth Crisis the End or the Beginning?**

## **Phasing Out Factory Farming Would Be a Boon to Animal and Human Health, and the Environment**

By Mark Ritchie

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Yesterday I received a call from friends in the Netherlands to warn that they may be forced to cancel the up-coming 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party of a close friend due to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. They wanted to make sure that I could cancel my trip if we were not allowed to freely travel to his home in North Holland. While I have been following this crisis closely for the past several months, I never dreamed that its impact could become so far-reaching, so quickly.

This disease has now spread to many countries throughout Europe at lightning speed, resulting in the destruction of thousands of herds of cows, pigs, and sheep. The economic and social losses are difficult to fathom for those of us in the city, but to farmers and rural communities, they are staggering and still mounting.

There are important lessons to be learned from this crisis about the foods we eat, and how we produce them. For Europe, the recent outbreaks of mad cow and foot and mouth diseases may signal the end of the industrial animal production system.

For the last few decades, some European countries and the United States have rushed to adopt the factory farm approach -- crowding cows, chickens, pigs, and fish into smaller barns, pens, or feedlots and feeding them larger doses of antibiotics and hormones to create artificially high rates of weight gain. While this factory farm model has long been criticized as cruel and inhumane, only recently have we begun to understand the wide range of negative effects and how quickly problems can spread. For example, the long-distance transport of both the animals and the resulting meat and fish products required by this factory-style model has greatly increased the spread of a number of diseases - from Foot and Mouth to bovine tuberculosis to swine fever.

The backbone of this industrial livestock system is the force-feeding of a variety of questionable items, like ground-up diseased animals and very high levels of antibiotics. Two clear results of this approach include Mad Cow-type diseases and the development of antibiotic-resistant bacterial diseases. Doctors are finding that many illnesses, ranging from earaches in our children to life threatening infections, can no longer be treated by normal antibiotics because of the inappropriate and dangerous overuse of these drugs as growth stimulants for farmed fish and animals.

There have also been serious environmental consequences, including ground water contamination, air pollution, and adverse impacts on our coastal regions and oceans.

In Europe, farmers, consumers, and politicians are talking about changes in the current food production system to control the current Foot and Mouth crisis and avoid similar problems in the future. There is a hot debate about ways to reform the trade rules of the World Trading Organization, which encourage the long-distance transport of food products – transforming regional problems into global ones. Many want to shift the focus of trade rules from maximizing trade growth to maximizing trade sustainability.

In Europe, they are also considering ways of taxing long-distance food transport to ensure that the full costs of the system, like the Foot and Mouth crisis, are covered. There is growing support for accelerating the transition to organic and sustainable production methods – following the successful model of the Danish who toward a goal of 20 percent organic food production. They are also rethinking the industrial model's view that animals are simply machines for human use – an important evolution in civilization's views on creation and other living beings.

More fundamental systemic change is also being debated. The European Commission is already discussing "La Fin du Model" --- the end of the globalization and industrialization model that has come to dominate the food sector over the last decade. The high costs of the current food system to consumers, taxpayers, farmers, rural and tourism-related businesses, and to animals and nature, are weighing heavily on policymakers.

Here in the U.S. we have the opportunity to carefully prepare for the possible arrival of Mad Cow and Foot and Mouth diseases. We can learn from the experiences in Europe about how to handle the short-term impacts, but we can also learn from their longer-term thinking. These disasters provide an opportunity to reconsider the industrial food model in the U.S. A lively debate is already underway in Washington DC over the next seven year farm bill. The discussion should expand beyond immediate efforts to keep farmers on the land and include strategies to transform the system to keep farmers, animals, consumers healthy as well.

Maybe the foot and mouth crisis are a way out of our larger farm crisis and a way back towards the diversified, environmentally-sound family farms that raise the kinds of safe foods and humanely-treated animals we all want. If I can't make my friend's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party because of foot and mouth disease, let's hope I can make it to his 51<sup>st</sup>.

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