Another year, another planet

FEBRUARY 20, 2006, marked the fifth anniversary of the start of the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) outbreak and DEFRA’s contingency plans were again under scrutiny. This time it was not FMD that was exercising minds but avian influenza, following confirmation of highly pathogenic H5N1 virus in wild birds in various countries in mainland Europe. The virus did not actually reach the UK until April, when it was confirmed in a swan found dead in the harbour at Cellardyke on the Scottish coast, when DEFRA was in the middle of a two-day simulation exercise designed to put its plans for dealing with an outbreak of avian influenza to the test. The simulation exercise was promptly abandoned at the end of the first day, to allow all available forces to be brought to bear on the real problem in hand. In the event, the virus got no further into the UK, although control operations during the month were complicated by an unrelated outbreak of avian influenza involving low pathogenic H5N1 virus in poultry in Norfolk. The incidents again served to illustrate the importance of effective disease surveillance and contingency planning, and of being prepared for the unexpected.

The importance of surveillance was further underlined in August when bluetongue was confirmed in sheep and cattle in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. This was the first time bluetongue had been confirmed in northern Europe and could herald a significant shift in the epidemiology of this economically important disease.

2006 also marked the fifth anniversary of DEFRA, which had been formed shortly after the General Election in June 2001 when the FMD crisis was at its peak. Things have moved on considerably since then, as evidenced, perhaps, by the effort that DEFRA has put into contingency planning and developing its Animal Health and Welfare Strategy (AHWS), while trying to establish itself as ‘the department that deals with the essentials of life’. However, there were signs during the year that DEFRA’s priorities are changing, and that it could be about to move into a different orbit. The first indication of this came in July when, at this year’s Royal Show, the recently appointed Secretary of State, Mr David Miliband, borrowing on the concept of ‘one planet living’ developed by WWF, introduced farmers to the concept of ‘one planet farming’, suggesting that it could provide a new direction for agriculture. Since then, one planet living, with its emphasis on environmental sustainability, has become firmly engrained in his department’s thinking, to the extent that it is now being described as ‘DEFRA’s mission’. DEFRA is currently re-examining its priorities in the light of this new focus but it is important that other priorities – such as animal health and welfare – do not become blurred in the process.

Progress with the AHWS in 2006 was disappointingly slow. The situation was neatly summed up by the chairman of the group charged with implementing the strategy in England, Ms Helen Browning, on publication of a progress report at the end of November. ‘Our findings have been at times uplifting, at times frustrating. There are some great initiatives making considerable progress; there are also pockets of deep despondency in both the farming and veterinary professions, and a lack of clarity on how to move forward on animal health and welfare issues. Fundamentally, we need to see a change in attitude from many players, including vets, farmers and government.’

At the root of the problem is the fact that the AHWS, with its particular emphasis on sharing responsibilities and costs, is being introduced at a time when the livestock industry is changing rapidly. Farm animal health planning is rightly seen as a way forward but, with many farmers financially hard pressed, it can be difficult to convince them of the benefits. Practices, too, face financial constraints, and, as the implementation group acknowledged, there are particular difficulties in maintaining veterinary services in areas of low livestock density where farm incomes are low. The group also expressed its concern that, ‘to secure animal health and welfare objectives, veterinary services must be available to all.’ This is a concern that should be shared by many, and the hope must remain that progress can yet be made with the AHWS while the infrastructure needed to support it is still left.

The Government continued to press the case for a new approach to sharing responsibilities and costs on animal health. The idea has also taken hold at the European level, where the European Commission is in the process of developing a new Community Animal Health Policy. The thinking behind it is relatively simple: if producers have more say in how disease outbreaks are dealt with, and have to bear more of the costs, they will make more effort to prevent them. The proposals are still being developed, but what is clear is that producers will be expected to bear more of the costs of managing disease outbreaks in the future.

There was good news in May when the European ban on British beef exports was finally lifted. This was a significant achievement and one which would barely have seemed possible when the ban was imposed at the height of the BSE crisis 10 years ago.

Progress on bovine tuberculosis was less satisfactory, and DEFRA’s latest performance report describes it as ‘one of the most difficult animal health problems that the farming industry currently faces in Great Britain’. New compensation arrangements for farmers...
whose herds are affected came into effect in February and premovement testing of cattle was introduced in England and Wales at the end of March. In August, the Government announced that it would be making increased use of the gamma interferon test, alongside the intradermal tuberculin test, to improve the sensitivity of the testing regime in cattle. Opinion on whether badgers should be culled to help control the disease in cattle remained polarised. Having launched a public consultation on the badger culling option at the end of last year, the Government indicated in July 2006 that it was still unable to commit itself to a decision on the issue as there were still ‘too many unknowns’.

Having been under discussion for nearly five years, the Animal Welfare Act finally made it on to the statute book on November 8. The new legislation applies in England and Wales; similar provisions relating to animal welfare are included in the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act, which was approved by the Scottish Parliament in July.

Described by ministers as ‘the most fundamental piece of animal welfare legislation for nearly a century’, the new Act consolidates and modernises a number of existing laws governing the welfare of domestic and captive animals, most notably, perhaps, the Protection of Animals Act 1911. It brings the law relating to non-farmed animals more into line with that already in place for farm animals and, significantly, places a duty of care on the owners and keepers of all vertebrate animals to ensure that the needs of the animals for which they are responsible are met. By making it an offence to fail to provide for the needs of an animal, it should make it possible for enforcement agencies to take steps to prevent animal suffering, rather than only act afterwards as has been the case until now.

The new legislation is welcome. However, these are primarily enabling Acts, and their future effectiveness will largely depend on secondary legislation and codes of practice which have still to be developed and agreed. It will also depend on the new rules being properly understood and enforced. This will not be made any easier by the fact that, although the basic principles are the same, the legislation adopted in England and Wales differs from that applying in Scotland in important areas of detail, as illustrated by the different positions that have been taken on the non-therapeutic docking of dogs’ tails.

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons continued to refine its proposals for a new Veterinary Surgeons Act, but the prospect of any immediate replacement of the Act faded in October when the animal health minister told MPs that, while there were some strong arguments for modernising the Act, there was currently no set timetable to produce a draft Bill. In the absence of new legislation, the College continues to move forward with plans aimed at fulfilling its vision of how veterinary activity should be regulated in the future.

Developments during the year included the launch to the public of the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme, agreement on the arrangements for a new modular Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice, and the launch of an updated website giving guidance on the professional development phase which all veterinary surgeons graduating from 2007 onwards will be expected to complete.

On the educational front there was a significant development in September when the new veterinary school at Nottingham—the first in Britain for more than 50 years—admitted its first cohort of students. In a year which also saw the introduction of university ‘top-up’ fees in England and Wales, the new school opened at a time of increased competition in the higher educational sector generally. In the current funding environment, the veterinary schools continue to face challenges in balancing research requirements with the demands of teaching a professional degree but, as reported during a debate at the BVA Congress in September, they continue to respond in innovative ways (VR, October 21, 2006, vol 159, p 537).

In April, the RCVS announced the results of a veterinary employment survey conducted in January. Among the findings was that the number of veterinary surgeons working in practice was increasing, but that vets were working shorter hours than previously, with fewer hours on call, suggesting that the long-stated aim of achieving a better work-life balance for veterinary surgeons might finally be starting to be realised. Another finding was that, of the 9671 veterinary surgeons responding to the survey, only 2 per cent considered themselves to be ‘non-white’. In December, the RCVS announced that, following a joint bid involving DEFRA and six of the seven UK veterinary schools, it had secured funding from the Department for Education and Skills for a ‘Gateways to the Professions’ project aimed at increasing ethnic and socioeconomic diversity among students embarking on a veterinary degree.

Developments in 2006 served to illustrate that the veterinary profession and the environment in which it is operating are changing, and that the threat posed by disease does not go away. A report published in May under the Government’s Foresight programme noted that animal disease outbreaks can be devastating in human and economic terms as well as in their own right and that ‘the great majority of emerging and re-emerging human infectious diseases have originated from animal sources’. In a world where diseases can travel quickly, animal health and welfare constitutes an important part of our planet living—and the Government must not forget this as it refocuses its priorities.