

Baa-Baa Zapped Sheep

A year has passed since fallout from the Chernobyl cloud contaminated grazing in northern Britain with radioactive caesium, but the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) is still finding high levels in sheep and expects this year's lambs to be born contaminated too.

The prospect of long-term damage to livestock has provoked an angry reaction from Cumbrian farmers, traditionally neither quick to grumble nor eager to criticise the nuclear industry, with Sellafield, the county's biggest and most powerful employer in their midst. In-

deed, a rumour that contamination originated not from the USSR but from BNFL has gained considerable credence in a community not noted for its gullibility.

Tests have shown the caesium bears the special 'footprint' of Chernobyl - twice as much caesium 137 as caesium 134. But though the facts don't support the rumour, farmers have good reason to feel suspicious of the nuclear industry and judge it guilty because of its close association with MAFF and the 'independent' advisory body, the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB). For both let them down badly over the whole Chernobyl affair. Ironically, the nuclear barons are this time innocent.

The original ban on move-

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Cumbrian crisis: the sheep that fell victim of Chernobyl

ment and slaughter of sheep, imposed two months after the Chernobyl rain, was expected to last just three weeks, after which time the minister 'firmly believed' the caesium would disappear. But a year on, MAFF is showing more realism, and a letter in February to farmers in the still restricted areas acknowledges that some lambs will be born above the 1000 bequerels per kilo 'action' level, at which meat is judged unfit for human consumption.

The Ministry's extreme reluctance to impose a ban - which resulted in some dangerously radioactive meat slipping through the net - was matched only by its reluctance to set out a clear compensation scheme. Today, sheep on the Cumbrian fells can be found marked blue, red or apricot: each colour representing a different attempt at damage limitation and testimony to the Ministry's failure to forecast how long the ban would last. Most farmers feel they have incurred extra expenses and losses from hanging on to stock, both alive and dead. Some think the most prudent policy would have been to destroy all contaminated stock, thus avoiding any genetic hazard which may arise in the future.

A year on from Chernobyl,

the NRPB, responsible for advising the Ministry and assessing the direct impact of the incident on the human population, has also changed its tune. The Board now admits it never foresaw the possibility of a large contaminated air mass. Equally surprising, it had to calculate the 'action' level for lamb from scratch.

In the light of the accident the Board is now prepared to offer more localised advice, even when the affected area is large. This is an important change in policy; had it been applied at the time to northern areas of the UK, it might have lessened the 500 cancer cases predicted throughout the UK by Dr Barrie Lambert of St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical School, especially if dietary precautions had been added to the ban on drinking rainwater.

The final insult to Cumbrians came in April from the DHSS. They have rejected a call from Cumbria county council for a programme of health monitoring on the local population following Chernobyl. Cumbrian farmers may be wrong in suspecting their caesium contamination came from BNFL. But they are right to conclude that the spirit of official scientific inquiry is not on their side. •

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