Part 3: Northern Ireland
12. Setting the scene

Cattle farming

12.1 The most obvious difference between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom is geographical. Northern Ireland has a major sea crossing to Great Britain and a land border with another country, the Republic of Ireland. Another distinguishing feature is its smaller size, and population of just 1.6 million.

12.2 During the period covered by this Report, agriculture in Northern Ireland was of relatively greater importance to the economy than was the case in the rest of the UK. Primary agricultural production accounted for 4 per cent of Gross Domestic Product in 1991/92, which meant that the industry was three times as important for the Northern Ireland economy as it was for the rest of the UK.478 It was characterised by a preponderance of small family-owned farms mostly engaged in livestock enterprises, and was heavily reliant on the export of animals and food.479

12.3 Almost all farms were owner-occupied and concentrated on extensive grass-based rearing of livestock,480 with more beef than dairy cattle.481 In 1991, over 80 per cent of farms had a beef enterprise of some description, and beef production made the largest contribution to agricultural output during this period – about one third of the total in 1992.482 Farmers did not use compound feeds to the same extent as in many of the larger beef herds in Great Britain; winter feeds tended to be silage rather than compounds.483 Where compound feeds were used, they were likely to have been produced locally.484

12.4 In Northern Ireland, suckler beef production was characterised by small herds, the majority of which were located in Less Favoured Areas.485 The average beef herd size in 1986 was just 12.1, compared with the UK average of 18.4. By 1996, average beef herd size had risen to 18.3 while the UK average rose to 25.8.486

12.5 Because it was expensive to ship animals, meat or MBM (meat and bone meal) to and from Great Britain, Northern Ireland had become more self-sufficient in these commodities than either Wales or Scotland. It generally produced a surplus for export.487 However, small numbers of cattle were imported into Northern Ireland between 1986 and 1996, mainly high-quality breeding stock from Great Britain and animals from the Republic of Ireland for immediate slaughter or finishing.488 The geographical isolation of Northern Ireland was also significant in relation to communicable diseases.489 The implications of these factors for the way the Province reacted to the BSE crisis are dealt with more fully below.
12.6 A unique feature of the Northern Ireland beef and dairy industry was the cattle-tracking system, which had been operated by the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland (DANI) since 1964. The system was developed as a result of difficulties in controlling and eradicating tuberculosis and brucellosis, and was intended to monitor the movement of cattle and help prevent outbreaks of these diseases.490

12.7 Under this system, every animal in the country had an ear tag with a unique number and could therefore be individually identified. The system was administered at DANI by the Animal Health Division using the services of the Veterinary Research Laboratories (VRL) and ten Divisional Veterinary Offices (DVOs).

12.8 Documentation was required for the removal of animals from the farm of origin to any destination. DANI staff administered the system at markets, slaughterhouses, border posts, ports and shows, and at any given location documentation was required to verify the provenance and legal and health status of the animal. Animals entering Northern Ireland at border posts were rigorously checked before documentation was handed to the DVO nearest to the border post where the cattle had been imported. Animals entering Northern Ireland via the sea ports were held in quarantine for four weeks.

12.9 During the mid-1980s the paper-based operation of both the brucellosis and tuberculosis schemes became administratively cumbersome, and a computerised system was installed in April 1988 after a two-year feasibility study.491 Existing records were transferred to the new system, which consisted of a mainframe computer connected to terminals at Veterinary Service offices, slaughterhouses, markets, border posts and the Veterinary Research Laboratories (later known as the Veterinary Science Laboratories). The new system allowed for the control and recording of movement of cattle, allocation and recording of tuberculosis and brucellosis tests, and the automatic allocation of tests and restrictions in the event of outbreaks of these diseases.492 Because the information was maintained centrally and was constantly updated, Veterinary Service staff had access to up-to-date information on the movement and health status of all cattle in Northern Ireland.

12.10 In 1990 a BSE control menu was added to the system, which allowed for recording of BSE status for herds and individual animals, and alerted users to suspect animals.

12.11 Dr Robert McCracken, Mr Ron Martin and Mr Pat Toal of DANI were all of the view that the real significance of the cattle-tracking system in the BSE context was that it had assisted Northern Ireland to maintain trade with EU Member States and third countries, rather than just being a mechanism for disease control. This was because it provided a means of certifying that beef had not come from an animal which could be associated with a case of BSE.493 Dr McCracken also pointed out that later:

490 The original legal authority for the system was the Tuberculosis Control Order (NI) (SR&D(NI) 1964/31), which has been amended several times subsequently: Tuberculosis Control (Amendment) Orders SR&O(NI) 1973/76, SR(NI) 1981/348, SR(NI) 1986/48 and SR(NI) 1994/216.
491 S278 Martin R para. 7
492 S278 Martin R pp. 20–1
493 S279A Martin R para. 41; S257 Toal para. 14; S279A McCracken para. 24
Our centralised computer system played a significant part in the implementation of an Export Certified Herds Scheme (ECHS) and resultant export of beef within the Community and Third Countries. 494

12.12 The Export Certified Herds Scheme was implemented in 1998, after the period with which this Report is concerned. It effectively allowed the ban on the export of British beef to be lifted sooner in Northern Ireland than elsewhere. The basis of the scheme was that exports of deboned beef and derived products from Northern Ireland could recommence if these products came from animals which were born and raised in a certified BSE-free herd and had remained there all their lives.

12.13 Mr Liam McKibben of DANI told us that the historical data on the computer had been useful in the epidemiological investigation of the disease by the Veterinary Service. 495 The relevance of cattle-tracking in general to the BSE story is discussed in vol. 5: Animal Health, 1989–96.

The slaughtering industry

12.14 By the end of the 1980s, almost all cattle being slaughtered in Northern Ireland were being killed in export-approved slaughterhouses, which were approved and licensed by DANI. 496 DANI’s Veterinary Service was responsible for all meat inspection in these plants and provided a full-time Veterinary Officer together with a team of trained Meat Inspectors in each slaughterhouse (see paragraphs 14.13–14.15). In addition, Divisional Veterinary Officers made regular visits to the slaughterhouses to check that they were complying with their licensing conditions. 497 The small number of plants processing meat for the domestic market only were also approved and licensed by DANI, but enforcement of meat hygiene Regulations was the responsibility of Environmental Health Officers from the local District Councils. 498

The rendering industry

12.15 The Inquiry was told that red meat waste from Northern Ireland slaughterhouses would have moved ‘probably exclusively’ to Northern Ireland rendering plants. 499 Between 1986 and 1996 Northern Ireland renderers produced sufficient meat and bone meal (MBM) to supply the local animal feed industry and produce a surplus for export. 500 Thus, in general, MBM was not imported from elsewhere, the exception to this rule being a single large import of 200 tonnes of MBM in 1983, which has been identified as a possible source of the infection in Northern Ireland. Around 85 per cent of the total output of MBM in Northern Ireland was produced by the two main rendering plants. 501

494 S279A McCracken para. 24
495 S255A McKibben para. 23
496 T80 pp. 144–5; DN01 tab 4 para. 22
497 S278 Martin R para. 24
498 DN01 tab 4 para. 22
499 T75 p. 20
500 T80 p. 52–4
501 T80 p. 54; M8A tab 39 p. 26
12.16 There were some differences in the processes used by Northern Ireland (NI) renderers. For example, Northern Ireland stopped using the hydrocarbon solvent extraction process in 1973, whereas renderers in England continued to use the method up until the mid-1980s, and in Scotland even later.\textsuperscript{502} The results of a survey conducted by MAFF in early 1988 indicated that during the 1980s time/temperature combinations in NI rendering plants had been reduced but not to the same extent as had occurred at some plants in Great Britain.\textsuperscript{503} The transition period from batch to continuous processing occurred in Northern Ireland plants during 1983–84, whereas in England it took much longer (from 1971–85).\textsuperscript{504}

The feed industry

12.17 There were some 75 feedmills in Northern Ireland which produced commercial feedstuffs for supply to others. Of these, seven or eight major feedmills together accounted for 80 per cent of ruminant feed production. These included several ‘national’ companies with operations throughout the United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{505} In addition to the smaller mills there were a further 400 or so home-mixers.\textsuperscript{506}

12.18 In the view of DANI representatives, it was ‘extremely rare’ for Northern Ireland to import compound feed, as it was generally self-sufficient in this area. However, a small amount of very highly concentrated pre-mixes was imported which might have had a high protein content or contained special vitamins or minerals. These would have been used for on-farm mixing.\textsuperscript{507}

\textsuperscript{502} S276 Denny para. 4.5; S40A Cartwright para. 5.1
\textsuperscript{503} T80 pp. 93–4; S252A Jack para. 46
\textsuperscript{504} S276 Denny para. 4.5. See vol. 13: \textit{Industry Processes and Controls} for a description of the different rendering processes
\textsuperscript{505} T133 p. 79; see also paragraph 2.4
\textsuperscript{506} S255A McKibben para. 14; these were farms which mixed their own feed
\textsuperscript{507} T80 p. 52