



Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

Baroness Hayman of Ullock
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

T: +44 (0) 3459 335577
E: correspondence.section@defra.gov.uk
W: gov.uk/defra

Rt Hon Alistair Carmichael MP
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

6 June 2025

Dear Alistair

I was grateful for the opportunity to appear before the Committee on 6 May 2025. Thank you for your letter of 20 May 2025 setting out a request for supplementary information.

Foot and mouth disease (FMD)

- *Have all Port Health Authorities now provided information as to the number of German consignments that were able to autoclear FMD controls between 10-16 January, and what is the updated figure of the number of consignments that were not stopped at the border?*
- *With what level of certainty were Port Health Authorities able to report to you the number of goods that bypassed controls between 10-16 January?*
- *What number of consignments from Hungary, Slovakia and Austria have erroneously autocleared FMD controls (if any)?*
- *Have the 55 recommendations of Exercise Blackthorn been fully implemented? If not, what is the status of the remaining recommendations?*
- *I would be grateful for further details of the FMD contingency planning being undertaken by Defra and the APHA.*

The Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) informed you that, based on data received from most Border Control Posts (BCPs) as of 2 May 2025, we had identified three consignments that auto-cleared FMD controls between 10-16 January 2025. The CVO explained that these had been referred to inland local authorities. Since then, Defra and port health authorities (PHAs) have continued investigation and analysis of trade during this window, including conducting manual searches of thousands of import records. This exercise has shown that it is not possible to produce a reliable figure to answer your question. For example, it is impossible to determine whether some apparent auto-clears were in fact goods pre-notified before 10 January 2025 and not dispatched due to our import ban. This issue arises when the importer fails to cancel their import notification, so the import remains valid on the Import of Products, Animals, Food and Feed System (IPAFFS). We have evidence from one PHA that this is likely to be the case in a significant proportion of their identified auto-clearances. Nevertheless, given our experience of working with PHAs

in the context of these outbreaks of FMD in the European Union (EU) and our understanding of their systems and the separate role that IPAFFS plays, we remain confident that the overall system of controls provided the necessary FMD risk mitigations. We recognise that there could be value in having data across these systems that would give additional assurance. We are therefore considering how data are recorded and analysed within PHA and Defra IT systems and how we might be able to draw together a complete data picture. Of course, as noted in my separate letter on an EU-UK Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement, many of our trade procedures will change significantly in the future and we need to make sure this data work is compatible with the over-riding priority of implementing the future agreement.

With regards to Hungary, Slovakia and Austria, we updated IPAFFS to remove the auto-clearance facility, the day that we imposed FMD restrictions on imports. As a result, it has been impossible for goods from these countries to auto-clear since the date we imposed import restrictions.

The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA)'s Contingency Planning Division organised Exercise Blackthorn on behalf of Defra, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland to test the four UK governments' contingency plans for a medium to large outbreak of FMD here. It was not a contingency plan for a FMD outbreak outside the UK. We have fully implemented twenty-one recommendations from Exercise Blackthorn. Of the thirty-four remaining recommendations:

- Twenty-two recommendations have been superseded and closed.
- Twelve recommendations remain in progress, three of which have been merged with a more recent lesson identified from Exercise London Plane.

By law, animal health-focused exercises of contingency plans need to be undertaken every five years at a cross-department, cross-devolved government national level and every year/few years at lower regional or limited national levels.

In addition to Exercise Blackthorn mentioned above, Exercise London Plane was held in 2023 and tested the contingency plans for responding to a national FMD outbreak with a concurrent Avian Influenza (AI) outbreak, with a particular focus on operational aspects and systems.

We can also learn cross-cutting lessons (such as on operational processes, communications or licencing) from outbreaks of other notifiable diseases and from major exercises for other significant diseases. Examples include Exercise Holly (2021, testing the UK preparedness for a national outbreak of African swine fever (ASF)) and Exercise Whitebeam (2024, a Scottish Government tabletop exercise in which Defra and APHA played significant roles, which ran scenarios for an outbreak of ASF within a pig pyramid based primarily in Scotland with sites in England).

APHA is in the planning stages of Exercise Aspen, a national exercise to test and validate our response to an outbreak of FMD, scheduled for 2025/26.

We have also been proactive in assessing and improving our readiness to respond if FMD does arrive. This has included such things as ensuring our FMD vaccine bank is suitable for the strains which have recently been detected in Europe, surging in extra staff to get key guidance and documents up to date, and having weekly meetings with key stakeholders.

In our evidence session, the question of how we are resourcing FMD preparedness work arose, and Gareth Baynham-Hughes explained how a new project team has been established. The first wave of this team's work has successfully concluded and a report from it is being considered internally. Consideration is being given to how follow-up action will be taken forward and this will be combined with work to respond to the National Audit Office (NAO)'s report, published on 4 June 2025, relating to animal health systems. The Department is considering how best to report in public – and how to engage relevant stakeholders – in this preparedness work.

Product of animal origin (POAO) smuggling

- *What does the 'communications campaign' for the ban on personal imports of animal products comprise?*
- *What progress has been made with delivering communications and when will the rest of the campaign be delivered?*
- *In evidence, you said 'we have been looking at whether there is more that we can do at source in the countries where you have the illegal meat coming in. It is about looking not just at what is arriving but how you can work to reduce the amount arriving in the first place.' What measures are being considered by Defra to achieve this?*

We have worked in partnership with the Department of Transport, the Home Office, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, ports, airports and international travel operators to communicate the emergency ban on personal imports from the EU. Currently we are dependent upon the travel sector's goodwill in respect of communicating safeguard measures applied to personal imports from the EU. Personal imports from the EU remain exempt from rules that apply to those from the rest of the world. This means that current legal obligations requiring international passenger transport operators, including airport, port and rail operators and travel agencies, to make their customers aware of personal import rules and facilitate information displays, apply only to personal imports from outside the EU.

Following agreement on 11 April 2025, to impose the ban which came into force the next day, Defra published a press release, issued social media, updated gov.uk guidance and alerted Border Force, ports, airports and international travel operators. We have issued further social media since 11 April 2025, for example ahead of bank holiday weekends. Defra has used Facebook, LinkedIn, X, Instagram and the Gov.uk national Nextdoor channel, and APHA has used its channels too.

Social media evaluation on 30 April 2025 indicates that our 11 April and 17 April posts generated over one million impressions across all platforms, demonstrating significant reach for our key messages. Both posts exceeded our standard impression benchmarks across channels, with Facebook performance being particularly strong. This success was partly due to our partnership between Defra and the Gov.uk account team. By identifying and proactively engaging key stakeholders for amplification, we achieved higher engagement levels, especially on X.

Sara Bool queried why a tweet on X, announcing the personal imports ban, was subsequently quickly deleted and does not exist anymore. This refers to a post on the @Gov.uk X account. Defra is not responsible for this account and did not issue this post. The post was subsequently removed as it failed to explain the rationale for the restrictions, which is important for the public to understand in terms of boosting compliance. Defra posted to the @DefraGovUK X account.

Noting concerns about availability of information for travellers, I wrote to ports, airports and international travel operators on 1 May 2025 urging them to step up communications. We have shared the following communications resources with stakeholders:

- Posters available in portrait and landscape available to download from GOV.UK: [Personal food imports: posters - GOV.UK](#).
- A document addressing common questions about the import restrictions available to download [here](#)
- Detailed information on bringing food into Great Britain: [official guidance on GOV.UK](#)
- Press notice - [Government extends ban on personal meat imports to protect farmers from foot and mouth](#)
- Social media content to share on the following channels:
 - [Twitter/X](#)
 - [Facebook](#)
 - [LinkedIn](#)
 - [Instagram](#)

I met with ports, airports and international travel operators on 3 June 2025 to discuss the communications that they have put in place. I was pleased to see, following a recent official trip to Nepal, that messaging on personal imports was clearly visible at Heathrow Airport.

Illegally imported POAO is a complex issue encompassing a range of scenarios and motivations. POAO imported into GB may be deemed illegal for various reasons. Illegally imported POAO includes properly declared goods, checked at BCPs and found to be non-compliant and those which evade or by-pass BCP checks. It also includes undeclared goods which may be either legal or illegal in the exporting country, intended for either personal use or resale here. In the case of undeclared goods, the evidence confirming provenance may be weak or non-existent.

Following the 2022 ASF ban on personal (undeclared) imports of pork and pork products from the EU over 2kg and not produced and packaged to EU commercial standards, the

government engaged with EU officials to raise awareness. Defra ran a pilot communications campaign in early 2023 focussed on travellers from Eastern Europe.

Defra has previously discussed the issue of illegal POAO imported from the EU with the European Commission at the Trade Specialised Committee on SPS measures. Romania has indicated that it has traffic controls aiming to detect movements of pork and pork products in breach of EU animal health rules. We will continue to exchange information with the European Commission on safeguard measures and their enforcement.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has previously sought support from the European Commission with tackling illegal POAO imports from Moldova via the EU, GB and NI destined for the Republic of Ireland. Despite intensified border controls at the Moldovan border, illegal imports continued. Efforts to engage with Moldovan Authorities highlighted the complexity of the issue.

In March 2023, Defra and FSA experts audited the implementation of ASF controls in the EU (France, Germany and Romania were selected) including measures in place restricting certain pork and pork products to EU member states of origin.

The outcome of negotiations with the EU on an EU-UK SPS Agreement will impact on future controls on POAO coming from or via the EU.

Enforcement operations at the Port of Dover

- *What cost saving would be made by ending the provision of official veterinarians for the anti-POAO smuggling operations?*
- *What level of operational coverage could be delivered with the £3.1 million funding for 2025/26 without the presence of official veterinarians?*
- *What role do official veterinarians perform as part of the enforcement operations at the Port of Dover, and who else at the Port has the expertise and authority to perform these functions?*
- *What operational challenges and biosecurity risk may be created by the absence of official veterinarians, and what are your proposals to mitigate these?*

Border Force is responsible for stopping vehicles and passengers to check for undeclared illegal imports of POAO intended either for commercial or personal use. It has the necessary legal powers to do this. PHAs do not have these powers. Border Force has long been responsible for seizing undeclared imports of POAO from outside the EU, without any PHA support.

To mitigate resource pressures on Border Force of the ban on pork and pork products from the EU referred to above, the government agreed that PHA staff funded by Defra ahead of the launch of the Border Target Operating Model, could support Border Force with seizing any illegal animal products detected. This support activity falls within the scope of a PHA's legal powers. This transitional funding ended in April 2024 when the BTOM checks started. However, recognising the unique circumstances at the port of Dover, the government continued to fund Dover PHA to deliver this activity. We have

offered £3.1m to Dover PHA for 2025/26 to support the detection of illegal imports at the short straits, alongside Border Force.

Dover PHA is best placed to answer questions about costs of official veterinarians and levels of operational coverage. However, the seizure powers in the Trade in Animals and Related Products Regulations 2011 are not limited to official veterinarians. Border Force can and does seize illegal imports of POAO without any veterinary input. We consider that environmental health officers also have an appropriate level of technical ability to undertake these checks. We are happy to discuss with Dover PHA the option for them to continue employing agency vets if, as Dover PHA suggests, it cannot resource other suitably qualified staff to undertake these checks. I would add that there are different legal and operational requirements regarding employing official veterinarians at BCPs to check legally imported POAO.

As you know, I plan to visit the Port of Dover to see the facilities and operations for myself and I will write to the Committee afterwards with my reflections.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Suella Hayman'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'S'.

BARONESS HAYMAN OF ULLOCK

MINISTER FOR ANIMAL WELFARE AND BIOSECURITY