

FIGHTING OUTBREAKS: LIVESTOCK EPIDEMICS

Advance planning and preparedness efforts helped the US government end 1924's Foot and Mouth Disease epidemic quickly and efficiently.

“ITS WORST MENACE...CONSISTS IN ITS EXTREME CONTAGIOUSNESS, SO THAT WHEN IT MAKES ITS APPEARANCE ANYWHERE IT IS LIABLE TO SPREAD WITH GREAT RAPIDITY IN ALL DIRECTIONS.” – John R. Mohler, Chief of the U.S. Bureau of Animal Industry, in 1938

Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) is an extremely contagious virus that causes mouth ulcers, fever, lameness, sores, and blisters in livestock like cattle, pigs, and sheep.* Animals can become infected through contact with sick livestock or contaminated objects, such as farm equipment. The virus can survive in water and on surfaces for up to a month. Even people wearing contaminated clothing or footwear can pass on the disease.

California had already suffered through multiple FMD outbreaks when new cases were reported on February 18, 1924 in Berkeley and San Leandro. Anticipating an outbreak, California's Director of Agriculture, George Henry Hecke, ordered a quarantine and banned the shipment of all livestock from the county.



A trench filled with cattle with Foot and Mouth Disease, 1924. One of the most effective ways to eradicate the disease was to slaughter infected animals and dispose of their carcasses. 1924. Courtesy UC Merced, UC Cooperative Extension Archive and San Joaquin County Historical Society and Museum. University of California Agricultural Cooperative Extension, San Joaquin County, Collection.

As more counties reported infections, both state and federal authorities took action. **Los Angeles County, like other counties, made it illegal to move animals without a permit and established as many as 470 “Quarantine Guards,”** 13 motorcycle patrols, and 12 car patrols. Travelers were required to leave pets at home. If discovered with pets, motorists were forced to turn around or give them up for extermination.

On February 24, just six days after the first cases were reported, the U.S. House of Representatives introduced a resolution. This bill allocated \$1.5 million to address the outbreak and compensate farmers for their losses.

The quick response from authorities can be attributed to previous planning and preparedness efforts.

The U.S. knew FMD well, with outbreaks reported in 1870, 1880, 1884, 1902, 1908, and 1914. In 1917, the federal government crafted a plan to address future outbreaks. **This contingency plan outlined how state and federal governments would work together, pushed states to pass quarantine laws, and encouraged cost-sharing to fight future outbreaks.**

The government's contingency planning and quick response meant that, by May 1924, the FMD epidemic had been suppressed and quarantine restrictions lifted almost everywhere.

* Foot and Mouth Disease is not related to the Hand, Foot, and Mouth disease common amongst children.