

IDRC FEATURE

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BOTSWANA FIGHTS FOOT-AND-MOUTH EPIDEMIC

by ERNEST CHILISA

Botswana is currently experiencing an economic crisis because of an epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease that broke out late last year, at a time when the country's economic situation was sound.

Botswana's economy depends largely on agriculture and the export of beef, the country's main product, to EEC countries. But due to the outbreak of this disease in and around the Ngamiland area, in the north of the country, all exports have had to be cancelled. This hit the small cattle owners below the belt since they depend mostly on sales of their cattle to the Botswana Meat Commission for their livelihood.

Because of the hardships faced by the people, the government has had to do away with primary school fees in the areas where cattle cannot be sold. And the National Development Plan has launched a scheme whereby cattle owners in the affected areas can qualify for loans of P50 (approximately \$65.00 US) if they remain in rural areas.

According to Dr.E.D. Paine, Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory Technician in Gaborone, the capital, foot-and-mouth disease is caused by an extremely small germ or virus. Highly contagious, it affects mainly cattle although goats, sheep and pigs can also be affected. Human infection is very rare but it can occur by handling infected animals or drinking fresh milk from infected cows. African buffalo are known to carry the virus.

In his column in the local AGRINEWS, Dr. Paine notes that most diseased animals recover although calves may die and pregnant cows abort. However, animals that have had foot-and-mouth disease may not breed again for several years and do not make good carcass meat.

The main symptoms of foot-and-mouth are sores in the mouth--on the tongue, gums and lips--and around the top of the hooves, especially in the space between the claws. Once the disease is cured the skin usually heals very quickly.

In Botswana, all cattle in areas where the disease is likely to occur, particularly in the northern and north-eastern parts of the country, are vaccinated each year, free of charge, by the Department of Animal Health. Vaccinations are also used to control the spread of foot-and-mouth disease when an outbreak occurs: animals are vaccinated and revaccinated as quickly as possible in an effort to contain the disease.

Botswana has successfully fought the disease in the past. A system of cordon fences plays an extremely important part in controlling the spread of the disease: in normal times, animals passing from one zone to another are held in a quarantine camp for two weeks, during which time they are vaccinated. Before being released they are examined to ensure that they have no symptoms of foot-and-mouth.

Since the outbreak last year, all movement of cattle has been restricted and only in the southern part of the country have these restrictions been relaxed. People in this area will soon start selling their cattle while those in the affected areas will have to wait a further 12 months. Because of the fear that hides, meat and other livestock products as well as wild animals, can carry the virus, their movement has also been forbidden outside the infected areas.

A standstill order has been applied, limiting the movement of cattle to within 16 kilometres of the place where they are located when the disease breaks out. The proper enforcement of such regulations may stop the spread of the disease and allow the Animal Health Department to bring it under control as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, the Botswana government is undertaking the construction of a double smallstock-proof fence along the western banks of the Ramakwebana and Sashi Rivers, covering some 350 kilometres from Vagaranga to the Tuli circle along its border with Rhodesia. It is feared that if the liberation struggle intensifies in Rhodesia, control of the disease in that country will become difficult.

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