Foot and mouth returns.

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An immediate national ban on the movement of all cattle, pigs, sheep and goats was imposed last night after foot and mouth disease was confirmed in cattle at a farm near Guildford, Surrey. Gordon Brown cut short his holiday on hearing the news and was involved in a conference call with Cobra, the government's civil emergencies committee.

A cordon was thrown round the farm and vets moved in to slaughter the affected animals. All farmers were urged by the chief vet to check their animals immediately.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) said a 3km "protection zone" and a 10km "surveillance zone" had been imposed around the farm. A spokesman refused to give its exact location, but a graphic on the Defra website showed the centre of the zones to be between Guildford and Aldershot.

This is the second outbreak of the disease in Britain within six years. The last outbreak, which started in 2001, lasted almost a year and cost the economy more than £8bn. At least 7 million animals were slaughtered and it took the British meat industry several years to recover. Tourism was also badly hit as access to the countryside was restricted.

Last night vets and government inspectors began to inspect animals on neighbouring farms. In a departure from 2001, the government said vaccination teams had been put on standby.

The farm has been under restrictions since late on Thursday evening when symptoms were reported to the local animal health office. The European commission has been informed, Defra said.

In a measure of how seriously the government is taking this outbreak, Mr Brown, who had gone on holiday earlier yesterday, chaired an emergency cabinet meeting by telephone and will return to London today for another Cobra meeting. Hilary Benn, the environment secretary, also broke off

his holiday.

The chief vet, Debby Reynolds, pledged not to repeat the mistakes made last time when the disease spiralled out of control after ministers failed to respond fast enough. Burning pyres of slaughtered animals caused widespread revulsion.

"All cattle on this farm will be culled. They will be culled humanely, then they will be disposed of by incineration," said Ms Reynolds. "They won't be burned. There will be no fires in the countryside."

She said farmers should inspect their livestock closely; animals would be banned from being transported. "Throughout England, Scotland and Wales there is a complete standstill tonight on the movement of cattle, sheep and pigs so nobody getting up tomorrow morning can move their animals in Great Britain tomorrow."

Peter Kendall, president of the National Farmers' Union, said: "It's very early days but what we're trying to do is get the message out to farmers as quickly as possible about being vigilant, about looking at their animals. And, of course, the very correct decision, I think, to put a blanket suspension on all livestock movement."

An investigation was launched to find out what contact the infected animals had with other animals. "It is vital that the disease is stamped out immediately", said Professor Hugh Pennington, professor of microbiology at Aberdeen university. "Once it becomes established, it is very difficult to stop."

In 2001, the outbreak began in pigs. The rapid spread of the disease led to the army being brought in to control the culling. Millions of animals were slaughtered on suspicion of having the disease. The result was a disaster for farming and tourism, caused the postponement of the general election and raised questions about the competence of ministers and the Ministry of Agriculture, as well as the future of farming.

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