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Dismay over 'green light' for meat smugglers

By **Lizzie Murphy**

THE Government was last night accused of making little effort to crack down on the illegal meat trade after it emerged that only one out of more than 35,000 seizures resulted in prosecution last year.

The number of people caught bringing illegal animal products into this country has more than doubled to 35,001 over the last four years, but in 2006/07 only one person was prosecuted – despite recommendations by the head of the National Audit Office (NAO) that more people should be brought to book.

Shadow Agricultural Minister Jim Paice blamed the Government for being too complacent, accusing Ministers of "playing at dealing with illegal meat". The Country Land and Business Association (CLA) said Ministers appeared to be giving a "green light" to smugglers.

Smuggled meat is widely believed to have been behind the foot-and-mouth epidemic in 2001 that cost British farmers £8bn, although it is not blamed for the latest outbreak.

There are currently 100 dedicated officers responsible for tackling illegal meat and 11 dogs who seek out smuggled meat brought in through the country's borders.

Compared to countries like Australia, which employs 75 special dog teams and 64 X-ray machines, critics say the UK's response is woefully inadequate. Australia brings about 50 prosecutions a year.

But the only person prosecuted here was an Egyptian woman caught with 83 kilos of meat and dairy products at Heathrow Airport in February this year. She was fined just £300.

In 2005 Sir John Bourn, head of the NAO, recommended that Customs and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) needed to raise public awareness of the restrictions on imports. In addition, he said Customs should prosecute more cases and consider on-the-spot fines.

But since then the number of prosecutions for illegal meat imports has gone down. There were seven in 2004/05 but only two in 2005/06.

Mr Paice said: "It's very serious and the figures we have got indicate just how serious it is and getting worse. The chances of being prosecuted for importing illegal meat are almost nil.

"I don't think the Government is making much effort at all and the courts are only distributing minor fines. We are really playing at dealing with illegal meat in this country and we have got to learn."

Mr Paice added: "We know there is technology available on trial but the Government won't use it. It allows them to X-ray suitcases at the point of departure and sends the images to the UK. By the time people arrive, the images of illegal meat will have been seen. But that technology is not being tried out."

The CLA is urging the Government to put more resources into tackling smuggling.

The CLA's rural economy advisor, Charles Trotman, said: "Given the number of ports and airports there are in the UK, the Government appears to be giving a green light to these meat smugglers."

He added: "We believe that more stringent measures have to be adopted at each point of entry into the UK to stamp out this menace."

Backing the Yorkshire Post's Clearly British Campaign, which is calling for clearer country of origin labelling on meat, he said products must also be properly labelled so that Britain can take pride in a food chain that is completely traceable and transparent.

Illegal meat expert Dr Yunes Teinaz believes meat crimes are "flourishing" and accused the Government and local councils of lacking the resources or expertise to deal with the criminal gangs who are out there.

But Lord Rooker, Minister for Sustainable Food and Farming and Animal Health, insisted the situation had improved since controls were tightened after the outbreak of foot and mouth in 2001.

He also said Labour had spent £25m on tackling illegal meat imports since HM Revenue and Customs took enforcement control of the country's borders in 2003.

Rare Prosecutions

An estimated average of 12,000 tonnes of meat products enters the country illegally each year.

Only one in 35,001 seizures of illegal meat products resulted in prosecution last year.

The UK employs 100 staff and 11 sniffer dogs to detect illegal meat products.

Australia employs 75 detector dog teams, 64 X-ray machines, on-the-spot fines and stiff prison sentences.

In Australia there are some 50 prosecutions each year for smuggling animal products.

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