

Illegal cattle-dealing in Tipperary rampant, and Department officials and gardai were aware of it

Smugglers turn to bribery as farmers dump animals

TOM FELLE

A SUNDAY INDEPENDENT investigation into reports of illegal cattle-dealing in North Tipperary has uncovered a widespread, sophisticated smuggling ring which has been netting hundreds of farmers millions in EU grants and meat sales.

The investigation has also uncovered reports of a new extortion racket by one smuggler, who is already the subject of a Garda investigation. Gardai and a local radio station have had anonymous calls from farmers about the alleged extortion.

One farmer said a neighbour was told to pay €2,000 by him on Friday to this man or he would report him to Department of Agriculture officials.

The smuggling operation involved farmers and dealers throughout Co Tipperary, but the foot-and-mouth crisis has closed it down and ousted six main smugglers, including one major operator in the Roscrea/Templemore area.

A consignment of some 500 Friesian calves was moved from a "depot" close to the border in late January and early February this year and sold to farmers in the Roscrea/Templemore area.

The calves originated in the North, where calves have been rearing for as little as £10 due to the BSE crisis, but were smuggled across the border to a central location before redistribution in the South. At the central depot, they were sold to dealers who drove to farms and sold them for about £50 each.

Once the farmer has bought

the calf he registers twins and gets two ear tags in the post from the Department of Agriculture. Should a calf die, the farmer simply replaces the animal. Thus farmers can claim grants for each animal and could expect to have made up to £1,000 profit after two years following a sale.

A Department source said: "The average for a cow having twins is about one in 30. There are farms in the area where the average is one in two." The source said that blood and DNA tests could sort out this issue, adding that it has been going on for years, with agriculture officials and gardai aware of it.

One man is responsible for all operations in North Tipperary and Offaly. However, a handful of others are involved in transportation, distribution and small-time dealing. This ringleader, understood to be from Limerick, was arrested in Mullingar two weeks ago as part of a Garda probe into illegal cattle-dealing.

The Department of Agriculture then began random spot raids on farms in the north Tipperary area and local farming sources say many farmers slaughtered illegally-held animals and dumped them in local mountain forests. Others simply let the animals loose on local roads.

In the past two weeks, up to 70 calves have been found in the Tipperary area with ear tags missing. Two of the finds in the past week were at Clonskenny, about half-way between Roscrea and Templemore: 12 calves on a roadside last weekend; seven, including one dead one, on Thursday night. The six live calves were slaughtered and buried in a disused municipal dump close to Corvina National School near Roscrea yesterday.

A Department of Agriculture spokesman said the decision was

taken to minimise the distance the cattle had to travel. He stressed that the animals were buried in a lined and membraned grave to minimise the risk of the spread of disease.

The department spokesman said the local council had received permission from the EPA. However, Tipperary North Riding County Council declined to comment.

Superintendent Jim Mulligan, who is leading the local investigation, said: "We would be asking people who have information to contact the local DVO office or any Garda station. We are actively trying to investigate the source of these animals."

One local farmer put it plainly: "It's not that people are bad farmers, but we would all buy cheap calf if we got one. You can't blame farmers for that."

He added: "Farmers do not want to get caught with these cards. They risk prosecution and may even lose their herd number, which would mean they couldn't work as farmers ever again or claim any grants."

Junior Agriculture Minister Noel Davern has promised tough action including "a sizeable number of serious prosecutions against smugglers and farmers".

Rogue dealers would be "weeded out, one way or another", he pledged last night, adding: "We have the power to spot-check any suspect farmer." Minister Davern, a TD for South Tipperary, said new legislation would see offending farmers and dealers facing harsh penalties, and, following prosecutions, the Criminal Assets Bureau and the Revenue would also investigate them.

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A NEW BRIDGEMAN: Pauline Conroy, widow of Cork TD Hugh Conroy - who died three years ago in a tragic cliff-walk accident - married a former tennis friend, London-based doctor Paul McCarty, this weekend at the Hogan chapel in University College, Cork. Photo: DONNA McBRIDE

Pyres create massive pollution

BRITAIN'S blazing foot-and-mouth pyres are spewing out more deadly pollutants than all the country's factories combined, unpublished official figures indicate.

The British Government yesterday admitted that no systematic checks are being made on the pollution, no single body is responsible for controlling it, and no assessment of the health effects have been carried out.

The massive airborne emissions are of dioxins - carcinogens 1,000 times more deadly

than arsenic. The pollution poses a substantial risk to public health.

Environmentalists fear that the pollution will make farmland unusable for long after the crisis has ended.

These revelations come as protests are rising both about the pyres and also about the disposal of the carcasses of slaughtered animals. Last week families blockaded lorries taking carcasses to a pyre at Hemmott Hill, Northumbria. In protest over health concerns.

Four teenage boys say they were raped by a gang

GARDAI are investigating the alleged rape and assault of four young boys by a teenage gang in Co Clare as a file is being prepared for the Director of Public Prosecutions.

The four young boys, aged 11 to 17, came forward after the youngest boy complained to his family that he had been cornered, stripped and raped by several teenagers.

In what gardai describe as a "highly unusual" case which is "most sensitive", the 11-year-old boy was allegedly raped three weeks ago in broad daylight in an old building where the victims and

perpetrators regularly congregate, close to the city's home.

After the alleged assault, Gardai were alerted and when investigations began three other local boys revealed that they too were subjected to sexual assaults.

Gardai are remaining tight-lipped about the investigation but all four alleged victims have undergone medical examinations while social workers and counsellors have been working with the children and families involved.

A spokesman for the Garda press office confirmed an investigation was under way as a result of an allegation of rape.

"As a result of that allegation, three other cases of similar allegations have been identified and there are investigations ongoing into each of these," the statement said.

Health board officials have been holding regular case conferences with the investigating officers but the Garda spokesman said there had been good co-operation from all the parties and none of the children had been taken into care.

"They were all known to each other," gardai said. "It appears it may have been a kind of game that went too far."

Manchester United unveil their new 4-4-4 formation



POWER PLAY: Manchester United line out with an extra man, pictured on the extreme left

I WOULDN'T claim to have an awful lot of soccer expertise but as I watched Manchester United's photocall on Wednesday night even I realised in my slightly sickening New Labour way that something was, as they say, up. The presence of an extra man in the line-up was worrying enough. Name-wise, even on the team seemed to notice it could only bode ill.

As I say, I am not the most avid of fans but it struck me that there were certain clues that could have alerted Alex Ferguson's team to the impostor in their midst. Name-wise, even Giggly must have wondered why the gaffer had decided to wait so long before unveiling the revolutionary 4-4-4 formation.

And one has to feel that even though Karl Power - for it was he - wore an identical kit to the rest of the team, some of the rest of the lads should have recognised that the 33-year-old unem-

JOHN SMITH

played labourer hadn't had many first-team outings until that point in the season. Let's face it: they train together, play together, room together and even share baths - somebody must have realised that they had never seen him dive in with a loose tackle before Wednesday.

While the stunt organised by *Front* magazine - has all been treated as something of a joke in the English media, it cannot but have provided the home team with a degree of inspiration.

Sure, Barcelona two seasons ago had been a set-back, but looking at Gary Neville happily saying "Cheese" beside a man he had never met before in the quarter-finals of the European Championships must have made them think that maybe it had just been bad luck after all.

What the German press

thought of the incident one can only guess. Perhaps they just put it down to that wonderful old English mania for dressing up. Although given the TV commentary team's inability to refrain from mentioning previous "clashes" involving Germany and England, coupled with the score after 45 minutes, they were probably just relieved that Manchester United appeared to be tending half instead of trying to tunnel their way out of the changing rooms.

The photograph was of course undoubtedly a coup for Mr Power, who has been planning the event since he hatched the idea in a pub in Barcelona after watching the extra-time triumph of two years ago. There is also plenty of money in the unemployed labouring game.

And certainly Mr Power, who roars in the nicknames "Fat neck", proved that there is a bit of toned muscle underneath that

fat by telling one player who did eventually wonder about his presence, "I'm doing this for Eric Cantona. Now shut it."

According to him, however, Dwight Yorke was first to notice but he just smiled over - giving us an early hint of that admirable detachment that he was to display throughout the game. It is also something of a boost for the laddish magazine *Front* (the one with a very attractive blonde on the front of it this month, kind of chunky).

Even so, I can't help being reminded of a cartoon from *Private Eye* a few years ago featuring two opposing Old-Testament armies. One of the armies is carrying three giant flags, the first depicting a pair of women's breasts, the second a pint of beer and the third a football. On seeing the flags, a soldier in the garb of the ancient Israelites shouts out, "Run for your lives - the Philistines are coming."

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TODAY'S WEATHER

Forecast for Sunday, April 22: Bright or sunny spells today. There will be some showers also scattered across the country. Rather cool with top temperatures only in the range of 10°C to 13°C, with light breezes making it feel cooler.

It will cloud over in the East and south-east later this evening and tonight with a chance of outbreaks of rain developing in a fresh northerly easterly wind. Elsewhere in the country, we should see it turning misty with patches of fog developing. Minimum temperatures will range from 3°C to 7°C.

THE WEEK AHEAD

Outbreaks of rain in the east on Monday, with a risk of some rain in the west. Tuesday, especially in the very south and there will be some fog also. Wednesday will be a cool breezy day with occasional showers. Winds will be fresh and gusty north-westerly. Winds easing overnight with some fog and frost developing. Present indications suggest that there will be a good deal of dry, bright weather for the remainder of the week, with sunny spells by day and with temperatures back close to normal. The nights though will be cold, with fog and also some frost.

morning **afternoon** **evening**

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EUROPEAN WEATHER

AA roadwatch

DUBLIN: In the city, Liffey Street Lower will be closed until Friday June 1 from Middle Abbey Street to The Lotts to facilitate drainage works by Dublin Corporation. Diversion will be in operation. Lane roadworks and diversions continue at weekends.

Drainage works are being carried out on Rochford Way in closed until May 7. Stevens Lane is closed until November 4. Diversions via Bow Lane West, Bow Bridge, Military Road and St John's West. South Circular QRC work continues during off-peak times affecting Wexford Street, Nicholas Street, Park Street, Bole Street, Cummins Road.

On the south side, George Street Lower will be closed in conjunction with the widening of the road. Diversion via Convent Lane to Patrick Street will be in operation. Lane roadworks and diversions will be in place between 10am and 4pm from Sillington Park Road to Moy Road on the N11. Traffic-calming works continue until May at Mount Merrion. Roadworks continue on the Leopardstown Road/Roundabout. Roadworks are under way on Arvoldale Road from the Church Road/Rochestown Avenue roundabout to the junction with the