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## Chernobyl legacy lingers down on the farm

Thirteen years ago caesium from the world's worst nuclear accident settled on sheep pasture in Wales. One farmer tells of the fallout

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By **James Meikle**

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The sun was shining, the lambs were gambolling and cloud shadows scudded over the browns and greens of the Welsh hillsides an April day to take your breath away. Trebor Roberts was talking about the rain the rain he hardly noticed as it fell on the weekend of May 2 to 4 1986, the rain that was to change the lives of his family and hundreds of others.

Tomorrow marks the 13th anniversary of the arrival in the UK of the nuclear fallout from Chernobyl, the world's worst nuclear accident, 1,500 miles away in the Ukraine. Ever since, some of Mr Roberts's sheep have been classed 'radioactive' and subject to strict controls and monitoring. Each year some lambs are born deformed.

Mr Roberts, 64, who farms in Snowdonia national park near Dolgellau, has to call officials from the Welsh Office's agriculture department to 'check in' his sheep every time he wants to move any off his land to market.

'The rain was not out of the ordinary. We are quite used to heavy rainfall. If I remember rightly, the reactor blew up on April 26. We knew nothing about it. We got to know on June 20 when they slapped restrictions on us.

'That was when it came home to us something serious had happened. It was announced in the middle of the afternoon on the radio. We were ploughing a field, and a chap came running from a house nearby and told us: 'Have you heard the news? You can't sell sheep anymore.'

'At the time we thought it was the end of sheep farming as we had known it. Everything looked so normal. Lambs were playing in the fields, sheep were grazing there, we were working there. It was only when some of those lambs were monitored that we knew the extent of it all. It was disastrous. You could see nothing, smell nothing, yet you knew the place was contaminated.'

The National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) at Chilton, Oxfordshire, had been monitoring radioactivity ever since Swedish colleagues alerted them to an apparent nuclear catastrophe behind the secretive Iron Curtain on April 28. The first weather reports suggested that a radioactive cloud heading for Scandinavia would miss Britain. It did not. But its contents did not linger except in upland areas, where radioactive caesium became a long-staying guest in the grass eaten by the hardiest sheep.

Briefly, people were warned not to drink rainwater, and soon 9,000 farms, in north Wales, Cumbria, south-west Scotland, parts of Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man

were subjected to safety rules to prevent people from eating contaminated lamb.

Over the years this has shrunk to around 435 farms with a total of more than 250,000 sheep, three-quarters of them in Wales.

The NRPB insists the accident has had, and will have, no perceptible influence on the health of the UK population. But sheep can decontaminate themselves naturally only by grazing on non-radioactive pastures.

Farmers were hardly immune to new technology. Jet aircraft have for years screamed down their valleys on low-level training exercises. But Chernobyl's cloud was a menace more silent and long-lasting. Mr Roberts, who had only just bought his farm after being a government tenant, remembers a Welsh Office official cheering worried farmers by suggesting the crisis could be over in three weeks.

A year or more later, soil scientists came to take samples on his 400 hectare (1,000 acre) farm, which soars from about 250 metres (800ft) to 900 metres (3,000ft) on the Aran mountains. He asked one when the 'situation' would be over: the reply was 'never'.

Scientists have recently recommended changes to reduce the government's testing and compensation bill, so far nearing £13.5 million, and to make life easier for farmers. But in Wales, putting up stockproof fences to stop sheep wandering, as against relying on boundaries such as roads and rivers, could be difficult.

Britain was lucky to get off so lightly from Chernobyl. An agricultural food counter-measures group is looking at emergency action should a nuclear accident result in far more widespread contamination, involving dairy farms or cereal and fruit crops. Pouring radioactive milk into the sea a solution after the great Windscale fire of 1957 in Cumbria would be a non-starter now.

Mr Roberts said: 'People need reminding about the danger of nuclear. I think man has got too clever and yet not clever enough.' He backs wind and water power to generate electricity instead of nuclear power. 'When turbines come to the end of their life, you can dismantle them and take them away.' Buildings at the Trawsfynydd nuclear plant 12 miles from his farm, which closed in 1994, are to be encased in stainless steel for 135 years.

Officials come regularly to Mr Roberts's farm and hold scanners to animals he wishes to move or sell. Three readings are taken to measure radioactivity, and the average must read below 1,000 becquerels per kilogram. Most now pass.

But three years ago, when his flock of 1,000 ewes and some of their 1,200 lambs born each year were checked, about 10 per cent failed. Nearly a third failed on a neighbouring farm.

In the first few months after the disaster, as the season's lambs came on to the market, other farmers in search of a quick profit were buying up Chernobyl lambs at £1 or £2 a head for fattening elsewhere before selling them on for slaughter. There was financial compensation for this indignity as well as for other losses at the markets. Now the family fattens its own lambs on lower ground.

But the fallout from Chernobyl now is just part of a wider crisis in farm prices. The £28 Mr Roberts was getting for each early lamb last year was not much different from the pre-Chernobyl £25. Indeed the £1.30 per sheep farmers get for rounding them up and preparing them for each test, though never increased, is a help in troubled times. Many receive substantial payments, too, from European subsidies for hill-farmers. 'All this

keeps people in the hills. I dread to think what it would be like without people living here.'

Mr Roberts's family has been in farming for generations. His wife's grandfather came to the present farm in 1913, and his son Emlyn, at agricultural college when Chernobyl happened, said: 'It is a way of life. As long as it is possible we carry on.'

He and his father agreed that the restrictions and tests had been a necessary evil, bolstering consumer confidence. 'As time goes by, we have learned to live with it,' said Mr Roberts, and their misfortunes have been minimal compared with those of Ukrainians closest to Chernobyl, where 31 died as a result of the explosion and countless others suffered long-term health effects. Farmers have over the years contributed money for children from affected areas to visit north Wales.

But most holidaymakers tramping over his hillside each summer do not know they are entering contaminated lands. 'I could even go into Dolgellau and people on the street would wonder what restrictions you were talking about,' said Mr Roberts. 'They have not a clue even seven miles away.'

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