

The Guardian

Britain's farmers still restricted by Chernobyl nuclear fallout

Environmentalists say controls on 369 farms highlight danger of plans to build nuclear plants around UK



Heather and rock outcrops on Snowdonia farmland Photograph: NTPL/Joe Cornish/PA

Nearly 370 farms in Britain are still restricted in the way they use land and rear sheep because of radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl [nuclear power](#) station accident 23 years ago, the government has admitted.

Environmentalists have seized on the figures as proof of the enormous dangers posed by nuclear power as the UK moves towards building a new generation of plants around the country.

Dawn Primarolo, minister for health, revealed 369 farms and 190,000 sheep were affected, but pointed out this was a tiny number compared with the immediate impact of radioactive fallout from Ukraine.

"This represents a reduction of over 95% since 1986, when approximately 9,700 farms and 4,225,000 sheep were under restriction across the United Kingdom. All restrictions in Northern Ireland were lifted in 2000," she added.

Critics of the nuclear industry expressed alarm at the latest numbers, which they believed would increase public unease about the highly toxic and long-term impact of radioactivity.

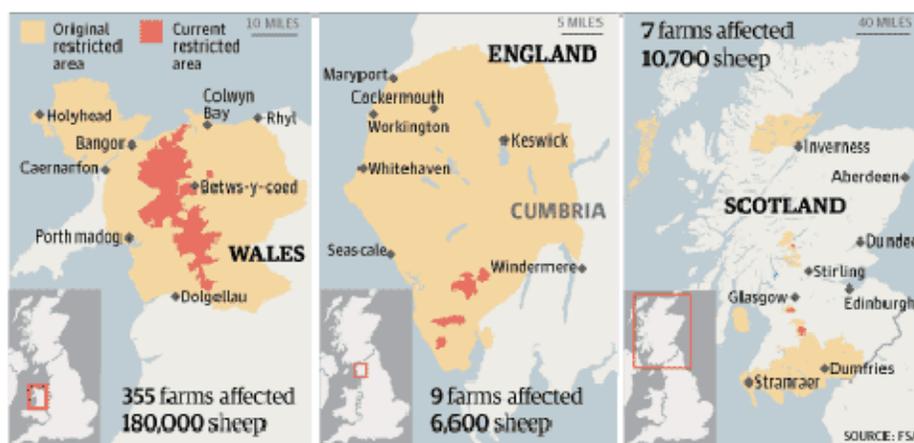
David Lowry, a member of Nuclear Waste Advisory Associates, said the figures demonstrated the "unforgiving hazards" of radioactivity dispersed into the environment, whether from Chernobyl in Ukraine, thousands of miles away and 23 years ago, or over decades from the Faslane nuclear submarine base in Scotland, [as revealed by the Guardian](#) last month.

"Ministers like to describe nuclear power as 'clean and green', as they press for up to 11 new reactors to be built across England and Wales. But these latest figures on Chernobyl fallout gives the lie to these claims.

"Any breach of containment accident at Sellafield's high activity liquid radioactive waste storage tanks would release many times the radioactivity released in the Chernobyl accident. And these tanks had an under-reported loss of coolant a month ago, so we have been warned," he added.

Paul Dorfman, a former government adviser and a senior research fellow at the University of Warwick, was also concerned. "Despite all the reassurances from government about nuclear safety ahead of a new civil nuclear programme in Britain, the latest revelations about the continuing Chernobyl legacy show the dangerous reality of atomic power," he said.

The Chernobyl legacy Areas still affected by radiation



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The Ukraine explosion and fire was the biggest nuclear accident ever. In its aftermath 237 people suffered from acute radiation sickness, of whom 31 died within the first three months. Accurate statistics on the wider health problems have been hard to ascertain because the Soviet authorities of the time refused to provide details.

More than 130,000 people were resettled from the immediate area and experts say there should be no [farming](#) there for at least 200 years. The Food Standards Agency said the release of radiocaesium-137 in upland areas of Britain is still able to pass easily from soil to grass and accumulate in sheep.

The European Commission imposed a maximum limit of 1,000 becquerels per kilogram (Bq/kg) of radiocaesium in sheep meat affected by the accident to protect consumers. Under a "mark and

release" scheme in the restricted areas, a farmer wishing to move animals out of the area must have them monitored by a hand-held device.

"Any sheep that exceed the working action level are marked with dye and are not released from restrictions," said a spokesman, who added that mass summer surveys of sheep are performed at farms where there is confidence that restrictions are no longer needed.

Huw Alun Evans's farm, Hengwrt Uchaf in north Wales, is one of the 369 inside one restricted area. Thousands of his sheep have been scanned for more than two decades. Evans's animals have failed radiation tests if they have been on higher ground, but the danger levels drop after they have been brought down to graze on lower pastures.

He says: "I remember a meeting with civil servants at the time [1986] and got the impression they thought it would be short-lived. No-one had any idea it would go on this long."

Revelations about the continuing impact of the Chernobyl accident come weeks after three different sites were bought in auction by EDF and other power companies for building new atomic plants in Britain. The sites at Bradwell in Essex, Wylfa in Anglesey and Hinkley Point in Somerset were auctioned for £400m by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority.

A similar process is expected to start shortly for land near the huge Sellafield nuclear complex in Cumbria, as the government moves to put in place new electricity generating plants to provide relatively low-carbon power and bolster domestic energy sources at a time when old atomic stations are nearing the end of their lives.