MYXOMATOSIS IN GERMANY

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A. Progress of infestation.

Myxomatosis was first reported in August 1953 from a few points in the Western frontier, extension during the winter 1953-54 being confined to their immediate neighbourhood. From this it can be concluded that birds of prey and vermin are unlikely to be the carriers. Infestation up to 30 kms from originating points spread during 1954, having their maximum peaks in May and September-October. A localization of the disease to the plains suggests flies (Aedes sp.) as carriers, having their biotope in the plains. Raised ground stood out of infested areas as islands until, by contact from fleas (and from short flight biting insects), they also became infested. In late autumn and winter, streams and creeks act as barriers which myxomatosis cannot pass. In 1955 myxomatosis spread further, particularly in the south of the Federal Republic where it moved eastwards. The mountains of Teutoburger Wald and Wesphalia in North Rhine-Wesphalia prevented further extension east beyond Wiedenbrück.

Low-lying ground is first infected followed by higher ground. Myxomatosis is spreading slowly in Germany, apparently due to climatic reasons which caused a large number of infected rabbits to die in the winter. When infection over a large area is again possible in the spring, the stock of sick rabbits likely to carry it is small.

B. Effects on the stock.

In infected areas 95 per cent of the stock of rabbits was destroyed. In the areas where the first cases of myxomatosis were reported in 1953 a new stock has
The spread of Myxomatosis in Germany, 1953-1955
been formed by the surviving animals. Whether the rabbits are resistant, cannot yet be said.

C. Effects on agriculture and forestry.

In regions of concentrated agriculture, damage by rabbits in most cases is much underestimated. Where a farmer intends to shoot 1,000 rabbits, for instance, he is likely to be required to pay compensation up to 4,000 German marks. Yet, in reckoning the destruction caused by rabbits, one can safely average such destruction at an average of 3 German marks per rabbit per year. The total damage in a well-forested region can be considerably higher, reaching, in North Wesphalia, 1 million German marks. There are areas where pine seedlings were planted which were so heavily damaged that a complete replanting had to be undertaken. Poplar cuttings must be protected by painting or by providing wire mesh against peeling by rabbits. One poplar plant costs 1 DM. From the above, one can realize the loss sustained in plants as well as the cost of their protection. In the interests of agriculture and forestry, myxomatosis is welcome. There are, however, some areas which are not under intensive agricultural or forestry management, such as heath, moor, low quality undergrowth and pastures, from which the disappearance of the rabbits is to be regretted.

Contrary to the experience of other countries, domestic rabbits and rabbits kept for scientific purposes have hardly been infected, at least in northern Germany.

D. Effects on predatory game.

The effects of the reduced stock of rabbits on vermin and predatory birds has not yet been ascertained. The only observation recorded is a reduction in the number of hawks' eggs in the infected areas. The disappearance of the rabbit as prey is so recent that its general effects cannot yet be judged.

The accompanying map shows the distribution of myxomatosis within the Federal Area of Western Germany.