

Dear Colleague,

Bovine TB and Badger Control – Pilot Culls

With culling now underway, I wanted to take the opportunity to provide you with an update on some of the key facts behind the Government's approach to tackling bovine TB (bTB) and, in particular, the role these pilots have to play in helping us achieve our long term goal of a TB-free England.

I hope that this letter will help answer any questions that you or your constituents may have but please do not hesitate to stop me in the House or get in touch via David Burrowes, my PPS, if there is anything you would like to discuss further.

I also attach the link to the leader from this week's Sunday Telegraph, which I thought you might find of interest: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/telegraph-view/10263427/The-badger-cull-must-go-ahead-to-save-animals.html>.

The Scale of the Problem

Bovine TB is the most pressing animal health problem in the UK. The importance of the situation for our cattle farmers, their families and their communities cannot be overstated. BTB is a devastating disease which threatens our cattle industry, presents a risk to other livestock and wildlife species such as badgers, domestic pets and humans.

This was once a disease isolated to small pockets; in 1972 only 0.01 per cent of cattle tested as infected. It has now spread extensively through the West of England and Wales. The number of new cases is now doubling every nine years and in the last decade we have slaughtered 305,000 cattle across Great Britain. In 2012 in England alone, over 5.5 million bTB tests were performed, leading to the slaughter of 28,000 cattle at a cost to the taxpayer of nearly £100 million. At one point last year, 26 per cent of herds in the South West and West were placed under movement restrictions. In the last ten years bovine TB has cost the taxpayer £500 million. It is estimated that this will rise to £1 billion over the next decade if the disease is left unchecked.

Cattle Restrictions

The task of managing bovine TB and bringing it under control is difficult and complex. The Government is committed to using all of the tools at its disposal and continuing to develop new ones as a package of measures to tackle the disease. In high-risk areas herds are tested annually and any cattle that test positive are slaughtered. Restrictions on cattle movements have been further strengthened to reduce the chance of disease spreading from cattle to cattle.

In January this year, we put in place plans for a new surveillance testing regime and stricter cattle movement controls. England is now divided into two cattle TB testing frequency areas. The annual TB testing of farms has been extended in the South West, West, Central England and East Sussex to include adjoining areas which are at greatest risk from the geographic spread of TB. The rest of England is now on four-yearly testing.

Farmers who have had a case of TB on their farm are not allowed to bring new cattle in until the rest of the herd has been tested for TB and a vet has carried out an assessment. Farmers also now have only 30 days, down from 60, to move cattle that test negative for TB from a TB breakdown farm.

Vaccination

Vaccination is another tool and one that we would all like to be able to deploy more widely. Unfortunately it's not there yet in terms of either development or practicality.

Since 1994, £43 million has been spent on developing an oral vaccine for badgers and a vaccine for cattle. We have committed to investing a further £15.5 million in vaccine development in this Parliament. Despite this, a potential cattle vaccine remains some way off, with further evidence needed of its efficacy. Once we have a workable vaccine, we will, just as importantly, need a validated test to distinguish between infected and vaccinated cattle. Such a test will form a central part of our efforts to press for changes to EU legislation to enable our cattle to be vaccinated against TB. Current legislation prohibits this and we would risk seeing our beef and dairy exports banned if we were to take unilateral action. We have the third largest dairy production and fourth largest beef production in the EU, worth more than £8.4 billion to the economy, and any such move would be devastating.

In January, I met the EU Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, Tonio Borg, to discuss progress towards a cattle vaccine. While he acknowledged that we have done more than any other country to take this work forward, he confirmed that the implementation of a legal and validated cattle vaccination is still at least 10 years away. Neither we nor the industry can afford to wait that long and it is for this reason that we must use all the tools currently available to us. I would like to assure you that if we had a viable and legal vaccine, we would be using it now.

The Government has also funded and developed an injectable badger vaccine; over the course of the next three years we are making available £250,000 a year to support and encourage badger vaccination. The vaccine does, however, have significant limitations in the field. Badgers need to be trapped before they can be vaccinated and the process has to be repeated annually for many years; this limits its use to small-scale projects. In addition the vaccine is very far from being 100 per cent effective in preventing TB in uninfected badgers and does not make any difference to those animals that are already infected. As a result, current vaccines, as far as they exist, will not be as effective as culling in reducing the spread of the disease from badgers to cattle or from cattle to badgers.

Badger Vaccination in Wales

Following the loss of a Judicial Review, and a change of government in Wales, the political decision was taken by the current Labour administration not to cull but to trial badger vaccination.

At the time of this decision, the Bovine Tuberculosis Sub-Group of the EU's Directorate-General for Health and Consumers (DG Sanco) stated that:

"The Welsh eradication plan will lose some impetus as badger culling will now be replaced with badger vaccination. This was not part of the original strategy that consisted of a comprehensive plan that has now been disrupted."

"There is no scientific evidence to demonstrate that badger vaccination will reduce the incidence of TB in cattle. However there is considerable evidence to support the removal of badgers in order to improve the TB status of both badgers and cattle."

In England we are testing that controlled shooting can be carried out by those affected by the disease at their own cost in a safe, effective and humane manner. If it can, the evidence shows that it'll be more effective in dealing with the disease reservoir and far less costly, with badger vaccination currently costing £662 per badger or £3,900 per square km per year in Wales.

International Examples

As we use the tools at our disposal and continue to invest in those that are currently out of reach, it is vital that we look at how other countries have tackled the disease. The experience of Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland and the United States shows that TB in cattle cannot be controlled without also controlling the disease in wildlife reservoirs:

- In Australia there has been a national eradication programme spanning almost three decades. It enabled official bTB-free status to be achieved in 1997. Their comprehensive package of measures to tackle the disease in domestic cattle and wildlife included rigorous culling of feral water buffalo.
- New Zealand is on the verge of achieving the same status by tackling bTB in the primary wildlife reservoir of brush-tailed possums. As a result, the number of infected cattle and deer herds in New Zealand has dropped from 1,700 in the mid 1990s to 66 in 2011/12.
- The Republic of Ireland has reduced bTB from 9.6 per cent in 1995 to 7.4 per cent in 2010 with a comprehensive eradication programme that includes badger control. In the same period it has increased from 0.8 to 9 per cent in England. From massive problems in the 1960s – 160,000 cattle were slaughtered in 1962 alone – the Irish authorities have turned things around to the extent that the number of reactor cattle was reduced to just 18,000 in 2012 – a reduction of 10,000 in the last 10 years alone.
- In the United States, Michigan has successfully reduced the average annual number of livestock herds affected with bTB to single figures since 2005 by dealing with the disease in white-tailed deer.

It's also important to note that there are a number of European countries with a known TB problem in wildlife who are tackling this reservoir of disease. Badger culling is undertaken in both France and Switzerland. Deer and wild boar are also culled in the Baltic countries, Germany, Poland and Spain.

Scientific Research

The research in our own country over the past fifteen years has demonstrated that cattle and badgers can transmit the disease to each other; culling badgers can lead to a reduction of the disease in cattle if it is carried out over a large enough area and for a sufficient length of time.

In 1997, Professor Lord Krebs and the Independent Scientific Review Group concluded that:

“The sum of evidence strongly supports the view that, in Britain, badgers are a significant source of infection in cattle. Most of this evidence is indirect, consisting of correlations rather than demonstrations of cause and effect; but in total the available evidence, including the effects of completely removing badgers from certain areas, is compelling.”

Reflecting on the results of the Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RBCT), which was overseen by Professor John Bourne and the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG) and ran between 1998 and 2007, a 2007 report by the then Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir David King, advocated the utility of culling as a tool in the battle against TB:

“In our view a programme for the removal of badgers could make a significant contribution to the control of cattle TB in those areas of England where there is a high and persistent incidence of TB in cattle, provided removal takes place alongside an effective programme of cattle controls.”

In April 2011, a meeting of independent scientific experts at Defra, including Professor Lord Krebs, confirmed the evidence base for such a policy:

“The science base generated from the Randomised Badger Culling Trial shows that proactive badger culling as conducted in the trial resulted in an overall beneficial effect compared with ‘survey only’ (no cull) areas on reducing new confirmed cattle herd breakdowns which is still in evidence 5½ years after the final annual proactive cull.”

Ongoing analysis of the results of the RBCT demonstrates the important role that culling can play in checking the progress of bovine TB, in spite of any initial disruption to badger populations on the edge of the culled area.

Professor Christl Donnelly, a former member of the ISG, has published an update to her 2010 paper, *The Duration of the Effects of Repeated Widespread Badger Culling on Cattle Tuberculosis Following the Cessation of Culling*, saying:

“In the time period from one year after the last proactive cull to 28 August 2011, the incidence of confirmed breakdowns in the proactive culling trial areas was 28 per cent lower than in ‘survey only’ areas and on lands up to 2km outside proactive trial areas was 4.1 per cent lower than outside ‘survey only’ areas.”

In January last year, Professor Donnelly published further analysis of RBCT data suggesting that badgers are responsible for half of all herd breakdowns in endemic areas:

“Based on mathematical modelling of data collected on badgers culled in initial proactive badger culls, estimates obtained by Donnelly and Hone (2010) indicated that on average at initial proactive badger culls roughly 50 per cent of bovine TB incidents could be attributed to infectious badgers.”

Pilot Culls

Extrapolation of the RBCT's results shows that culling based on the Trial's minimum criteria and conducted in a co-ordinated, sustained and simultaneous manner not only stops the increase in breakdowns but could be expected to lead to a reduction in the number of new confirmed cases of TB in cattle across the culled area and adjacent 2km ring, relative to a similar uncultured area.

The purpose of the two pilots is not to evaluate the effectiveness of badger culling in reducing the incidence of cattle TB breakdowns. That is something that the RBCT already established. The Government's decision to pilot two culls in TB hotspots represents a logical extension of this work. It has been designed to take account of practical issues that have been highlighted by previous scientific studies so as to safeguard the benefits that culling can be expected to deliver. For example, any farmer participating in a cull will have to be compliant with all of the Government's TB cattle controls, including strict bio-security measures, to reduce the risk of the spread of disease between badgers and cattle. Each pilot area will be significantly larger than 150km², with at least 70 per cent of it accessible for culling. Applicants must also, where practical, make use of barriers and buffers, such as motorways, rivers, coastlines or vaccinated areas, at the boundary of the culling area. All of these criteria are aimed at giving confidence in an overall beneficial effect.

To ensure that we continue to add to this evidence base, the effectiveness, humaneness and safety of badger removal in the pilot areas will be closely monitored, and the results of this monitoring will be evaluated by an independent panel of experts who will report their findings to Ministers. The costs and the benefits of the approach being piloted have been assessed in terms of the financial implications and the difference this will make to the progression of TB in cattle.

The “humaneness” of controlled shooting

Culling of free-ranging wildlife by controlled shooting is widely practised in rural areas. It is commonly used to reduce fox numbers (at night) and deer (daytime). We are, however, proceeding cautiously, with the initial licensing of controlled shooting in just two pilot areas, accompanied by monitoring to test our assumptions about its effectiveness, humaneness and safety. Operators taking part in the cull have undertaken training and competence testing and follow best practice guidelines. The best practice guidance is designed to minimise the risk of wounded badgers facing a prolonged death. This will be monitored throughout the pilots. On 60 occasions in each pilot area night shooting will be observed and on a further 10 occasions in each area day time preparations and the subsequent night shooting will be observed.

Badger Numbers and Population

Over the past year we have invested considerable time and effort in monitoring work to establish a reliable estimate of the numbers of badgers in the two cull areas. These figures were used by Natural England as part of the licensing process to set the minimum and maximum number of badgers to be culled.

As a result of this work, the two pilots will see the removal of around 5,000 badgers – a minimum of 2,081 in Somerset and 2,856 in Gloucestershire. That’s around 10 per cent of the 50,000 badgers killed on our roads each years or just over 1 per cent of the estimated national population.

The removal of this number of badgers poses no risk to the viability of the badger population in these two areas. Only last September, the Bern Bureau confirmed that the pilot culls are “within the obligation of the UK under the Convention and should not cause a threat to the population if the monitoring is carried out properly.”

Veterinary Opinion

The British Veterinary Association (BVA), whose members have to deal with this horrendous disease on a daily basis, have reiterated their support for the pilot culls:

“We have not taken the decision to support the pilot badger culls lightly; we have considered all of the scientific evidence, which supports the management of bovine TB in badgers in order to reduce the incidence of the disease in cattle.

“We accept that there is a gap in our knowledge, which is whether controlled shooting can deliver a badger cull humanely and safely, and to the same degree of effectiveness as cage trapping and shooting. That is what the pilots are designed to address and why is it important that they are allowed to go ahead unhindered.”

NFU Injunction

Following concerns about increasing levels of harassment, the NFU was successful in obtaining a High Court injunction under the Protection from Harassment Act. The injunction is not intended to prevent peaceful and lawful protest but to protect those people participating in or associated with the cull from acts of harassment or intimidation. The list of ‘protected persons’ includes farmers, land owners, tenants, NFU personnel and their families.

The activities prohibited by the injunction include:

- Entering onto any privately-owned land (other than a public right of way) within the cull zone without the express or implied consent of the owner or lawful occupier of that land

- Assaulting, threatening or causing harassment, alarm or distress to any 'protected person'
- Making any abusive or threatening communication with a 'protected person'
- Protesting within 100 metres of a 'protected person's' home or 25 metres of any fixed structure used as a business premises
- Harassing or intimidating any 'protected person' by filming or photographing them or any vehicle, land, premises or house belonging to them
- Using, publishing or disclosing any image from which a 'protected person's' identity, home, farm or premises can be identified.

The Way Forward

The Government remains determined to tackle bovine TB by all available means. At the end of July we published our draft TB Eradication Strategy, of which badger control is only one component. The Strategy outlines how we plan to reach our long term goal of achieving official bovine TB-free status in England over 25 years. It not only draws on international experience demonstrating the need to bear down on the disease in cattle and wildlife but it also sets out our determination to work in partnership with the industry to develop and deploy new technologies. We will also explore new options for governance, delivery and funding. This approach was endorsed by the House of Commons on 5 June.

This determination is in contrast to the last Labour government which stopped pro-active measures to control the disease in wildlife. We must not repeat their failed policy of doing nothing – one they continue to promulgate today. Between 1998 and 2010, the total number of herd breakdowns tripled from 1,226 to 3,634 and the number of cattle slaughtered rose sixfold from 4,102 to 24,000.

Only if we use every tool at our disposal, including culling, will we begin to check the progress of this devastating disease, put in place the foundations for the prosperous cattle industry that the public wishes to see and honour the commitment we made in the Coalition Agreement to our hard hit rural communities:

“As part of a package of measures, we will introduce a carefully managed and science-led policy of badger control in areas with high and persistent levels of bovine tuberculosis.”

The decision to pilot a badger cull is not one that has been taken lightly. No one wants to kill badgers. It is based on the best available scientific evidence and the experience of other countries. No country in the world with a major cattle industry, and where wildlife carries TB, has eradicated the disease in cattle without tackling it in wildlife too. That is why it is so disappointing that the last government took the deliberate decision not to control the disease in wildlife, leaving our cattle industry so exposed to this deadly bacteria. We want to see healthy cattle living alongside healthy badgers.

Yours ever,

Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs