

Briefing

Bovine TB and badgers (England)

The Wildlife Trusts are very conscious of the hardship that bovine TB (bTB) causes in the farming community and the need to find the right mechanisms to control the disease. Our work in providing advice to farmers across the UK means we recognise and value the crucial contribution that environmentally-friendly farming practices make to wildlife.

The Government will publish its policy on bovine TB control in 2011, following consultation in 2010 on a proposed licenced badger cull in affected areas in England. The Welsh Assembly Government is developing separate proposals for a badger cull in a defined part of West Wales.

The Wildlife Trusts have concluded from the available scientific evidence that the Government's proposals for badger culling in England would be unsuccessful in helping to control bTB. The science suggests that, if implemented, these proposals could make the bTB problem worse. This is due to the 'perturbation effect' from culling, causing badgers to range more widely and increasing the risks of disease transmission.

The Wildlife Trusts believe a number of different measures are needed to eradicate bovine TB. They should include:

- **Badger vaccination** – to prevent disease transmission from badger to badger and from badger to cattle. Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust will be using an injectable badger vaccine on ten nature reserves in 2011. We also urge Defra to continue development of an oral badger vaccine;
- **Biosecurity** – all possible measures should be pursued to prevent disease transmission between cattle on-farm. Not all the control measures recommended by the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB have been implemented;
- **Cattle vaccination** – developing a cattle vaccine is the long-term solution to bovine TB.

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Key quotes

'Wildlife management should be based on evidence and scientific evaluation of likely outcomes'

Sir David Attenborough
Prof David Macdonald
The Wildlife Trusts, March 2006

'Badger culling can make no meaningful contribution to cattle TB control in Britain'

Professor John Bourne,
Chairman, Independent
Scientific Group on Cattle TB,
June 2007

'We now know from reading the report of the Independent Scientific Group that culling is not a viable policy option'

Lord Krebs, former
Government adviser on bovine
TB, House of Lords, July 2007

'I think it is scientifically among the worst options they could have chosen'

Dr Rosie Woodroffe, former
member of the Independent
Scientific Group on TB in Cattle,
September 2010

Questions and answers

How could a badger cull make the bovine TB problem worse?

Badgers typically live in social groups of four to seven animals with defined territorial boundaries. Culling disrupts the organisation of these social groups, causing surviving badgers to range more widely than normal and increasing the risks of disease transmission. This is known as the ‘perturbation effect’. The Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB concluded in its final report (2007) that it was ‘unable to conceive of a system of culling, other than the systematic elimination, or virtual elimination, of badgers over very extensive areas, that would avoid the serious adverse consequences of perturbation’.

What are the practical problems with the Government’s proposed badger cull?

In its consultation document, the Government identifies 12 criteria required for an effective licenced cull. These include culling for a period of at least four years and over a minimum of 70% of a land area no less than 150km². The Wildlife Trusts do not believe that all these criteria can be met effectively and together. There are a number of practical problems with implementing, enforcing and monitoring a licenced cull by landowners eg participants in the cull might drop-out, through changes in land ownership and tenancy. The final report of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (2007) states that ‘culling badgers under licence not only could fail to achieve a beneficial effect, but could increase

the incidence of cattle TB and increase the geographical spread of the disease, irrespective of whether licences were issued to individual farmers or to groups’.

What alternative measures could be taken now?

Vaccination of badgers could form the central part of a short to medium term strategy to reduce bTB transmission from badgers to cattle. Studies have shown that vaccination is effective in significantly reducing the progression and severity of infection and that vaccinated badgers were significantly less likely to subsequently test positive for bTB. On-farm transmission from cattle to cattle and cattle to badger could also be reduced through effective testing, movement controls and other bio-security measures (eg badger proof food stores and feeding areas). The Wildlife Trusts support the provision of advice, support and incentives for farmers and would like to see regulation implemented, where possible, to ensure that measures are followed.

How can we eradicate bovine TB?

The long-term solution to the bTB problem is the development of a cattle vaccine. We welcome the statements in the consultation that a licenced cattle vaccine and a diagnostic test should be ready by the end of 2012, along with the proposed change to EU legislation to allow a cattle vaccine to be used by 2015. Achieving this long-term solution would ultimately be an effective, efficient, wildlife-friendly way of controlling the disease.

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There are 47 individual Wildlife Trusts covering the whole of the UK and the Isle of Man and Alderney. All are working for an environment rich in wildlife for everyone. We have more than 800,000 members including 150,000 members of our junior branch Wildlife Watch. Our vision is to create A Living Landscape and secure Living Seas. We manage around 2,300 nature reserves and every year we advise thousands of landowners and organisations on how to manage their land for wildlife. We also run marine conservation projects around the UK, collecting vital data on the state of our seas and celebrating our amazing marine wildlife. Every year we work with thousands of schools and our nature reserves and visitor centres receive millions of visitors. Each Wildlife Trust is working within its local communities to inspire people about the future of their area: their own Living Landscapes and Living Seas.

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