

Briefing

Bovine TB and Badgers

The Wildlife Trusts are very conscious of the hardship that bovine TB (bTB) causes the farming community and the need to find the right mechanisms to control the disease. Our involvement with this issue over a long period has led us to conclude that a sustained programme of vaccination, alongside improved bio-security measures, improved testing and controls on cattle movement would be the best means of tackling bTB.

We urge the Government to halt the imminent pilot badger culls in Gloucestershire and Somerset.

Since the Randomised Badger Control Trial (RBCT) and report of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB in 2007, scientific experts have consistently concluded that culling badgers can make no meaningful contribution to controlling bTB in Britain. This is due to the ‘perturbation effect’, where disruption to badger social groups results in an increased risk of disease transmission.

Scientific experts have also agreed that, because ‘controlled shooting’ will be the primary method of culling, the outcome of the trial culls is more unpredictable than the RBCT. Despite this level of uncertainty, there will be no scientific evaluation of the impact on bTB from the pilot culls.

Although there is no ‘quick fix’ to the bTB problem, The Wildlife Trusts believe that Government efforts to tackle the disease should focus on:

- **Biosecurity:** Effective implementation of all possible measures to prevent disease transmission.
- **Badger vaccination:** Develop a clear strategy for deployment of the injectable BadgerBCG vaccine and continue development of an oral badger vaccine.
- **Cattle vaccination:** Secure change to EU regulation to permit use of a cattle vaccine and develop a strategy for its deployment.

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Key quotes and facts

‘The scientific case is as clear as it can be: this cull is not the answer to TB in cattle’

Lord Krebs, former Government adviser on bovine TB, October 2012

‘The complexities of TB transmission mean that licensed culling risks increasing cattle TB rather than reducing it’

Prof. Sir Patrick Bateson FRS and 31 other scientists, Letter to the Observer, October 2012

‘It is not badgers that spread the disease throughout the country; it is cattle’

Prof. John Bourne, former Chairman, Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB, October 2012

‘All the evidence shows that culling badgers increases the proportion of badgers that have TB’

Dr Rosie Woodroffe, former member, Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB, October 2012

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 is ‘controlled shooting’?

‘Controlled shooting’ involves the shooting of badgers in the field (mainly at night). It is estimated to cost considerably less than cage trapping and shooting, the method used in the Government-led RBCT. There are a number of practical difficulties in shooting free-ranging badgers as they spend much of their time in cover, where they are difficult to see clearly and approach. There are also risks both to public safety and animal welfare.

What are the difficulties with an industry-led cull?

An industry-led cull is unlikely to match the resources used in the Government-led RBCT. The licensing authority, Natural England, has expressed concern at the ‘lack of evidence that

a farmer-led cull can replicate what has only previously been undertaken by government (and even then on a smaller scale)’. In addition, scientific experts convened by Defra concluded that ‘informed expert opinion suggests that the more that future culling policy deviates from the conditions of the RBCT ... the more likely that the effects of the policy will differ, either positively or negatively, and with potential variability in outcome between areas’.

What further action can the Government take now?

In addition to developing a clear strategy for badger vaccination, the Government could make a number of improvements to its existing TB eradication programme including:

- **Improve testing and controls on cattle movement.** A European Commission inspection report (September 2011) found ‘a number of potential weaknesses’ and ‘a fragmented system of controls’ in the UK’s current TB eradication programme. A Cambridge University led study (October 2012) found that ‘deficiencies in testing may be contributing to the continuing bTB epidemic’;
- **Improve biosecurity on farm.** A Food and Environment Research Agency led study (December 2011) found that ‘relatively simple practical measures can substantially reduce the likelihood of badger visits to buildings and reduce some of the potential for contact and disease transmission between badgers and cattle’.

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There are 47 individual Wildlife Trusts covering the whole of the UK. All are working for an environment rich in wildlife for everyone. They manage more than 90,000 hectares of land in the UK and provide around 5,000 days of land management advice to others every year. 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. 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.