

## The Randomised Badger Culling Trial

In 1997 the Independent Scientific Group (ISG) started a Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RBCT) in the areas of England with the highest rates of TB in cattle. It was probably the biggest field trial ever carried out and took ten years to complete at a cost of £50 million. During the trial about 11,000 badgers were trapped in cages and shot. This took a substantial effort by a large team of skilled staff.

The trial was carried out with scientific rigour and was designed and overseen by pre-eminent scientists. It was carried out in 30 areas of 100km<sup>2</sup>. The 30 areas were grouped into 10 sets of three. In one area badgers were killed every year ('proactive culling'), and in one area the badgers were killed, on and near farms with a recent outbreak of TB in cattle ('reactive culling'). There was no killing, just surveying in the third, scientific control, area. Ministers stopped the reactive culling in November 2003 because it caused around a 20% increase in cattle TB incidence. Proactive culling reduced cattle TB inside the proactive area but increased it on neighbouring land. It took four years of killing badgers before there was an overall drop in cattle TB and this drop was small and hugely expensive.

Importantly, the trial produced evidence that cattle transmit cattle TB to badgers. In 2001 most cattle testing for TB was stopped for a time because of the Foot and Mouth Disease epidemic. Hence infected cattle were not identified and removed, but remained able to transmit infection. TB in badgers rose markedly during this time, but dropped again when cattle testing resumed.

(Final Report of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB page 20.)

It also produced evidence of the prevalence of TB in badgers as badger carcasses were tested for the disease and a Road Traffic Survey was also carried out. The overall prevalence of bovine TB infection in road-killed badgers was 15% and in the proactively killed badgers it was 16.6%. It has been proposed that only severely lesioned badgers can be highly infectious, but the number of severely lesioned animals was very low – less than 1.7%.

The final report was issued in June 2007. It reached two key conclusions. Firstly that though badgers were a source of cattle TB "badger culling can make no meaningful contribution to cattle TB control; in Britain. Indeed, some policies under consideration are likely to make matters worse rather than better. Second, weaknesses in cattle testing regimes mean that cattle themselves contribute significantly to the persistence and spread of disease in all areas where TB occurs, and in some parts of Britain are likely to be the main source of infection. Scientific findings indicate that the rising incidence of disease can be reversed, and geographical spread contained, by the rigid application of cattle-based control measures alone."

(Final Report of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB page 5.)