

Welsh cull BT response

Badger Trust sees the Welsh Assembly's move in favour of a badger "cull"—slaughter is a more apt description-- as perverse, politically motivated, and without any significant scientific validation. Recent history, the best, peer-reviewed science, and commonsense, all say this is a flawed, futile, irrational decision.

History: a bTB epidemic which began in the 1930s was resolved in the late 1960s by a series of cattle control measures—without one badger being killed or implicated. At one stage 40 per cent of the national herd was infected (the current epidemic (1) is very much smaller). Then, as now, cattle- to -cattle spread was the root cause. The solution lay in more frequent testing, tight controls over cattle movement to prevent disease spread, and the slaughter of all infected beasts. Unhappily, tiny pockets of infection remained in herds in the south west when the eradication programme was called off, and this allowed bTB to spread once more. History shows us the cause and the solution. It also reminds us that a so-called scientific eradication programme has no value unless a control area is simultaneously set up to compare the results of one action with another: in this instance, killing versus no killing. MAFF made that mistake in the 70s and 80s. In TB hotspots in the south west thousands of badgers were killed in the belief that removing them would reduce bTB. In fact it increased. Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money was wasted, thousands of mostly healthy badgers were slaughtered. At no time did MAFF have any control checks in place to judge the efficacy of the slaughter. Now the Welsh seem intent on repeating that mistake, as we explain later.

Science: a 10-year £50million taxpayer-funded research programme by the independent scientific group (ISG) concluded that a badger cull would make no meaningful contribution to the eradication of bTB. Indeed, the research concluded that localised, reactive culling made the position worse. It confirmed that the best way forward lay with a series of cattle-control measures (better (2) more frequent testing, as well as pre-movement testing) allied to improved on- farm biosecurity). In the face of such compelling evidence the Welsh decision is at best perverse. It ignores peer-reviewed science in favour of supposition and prejudice and one brief scientific report which has been largely dismissed. Claims that culling has worked in Southern Ireland are disproved by the facts. Bovine TB increased by 13% in just one year in the Republic of Ireland, despite the most sustained programme of badger extermination ever undertaken in Western Europe. Yet in Northern Ireland, where no badgers are being killed, the disease continues to decline.

Wales is currently suffering from the highest rate of bovine TB in the UK. Why? In part it's a direct result of increased testing. If you test more often, you find more disease. The payback comes later. Disease levels begin to fall and are eventually brought under control. A recent statement by Rural Affairs Minister Elin Jones helps prove the point. On July 9 she announced that Health Check Wales, the Assembly's improved testing regime, had found, and removed, disease in cattle that might otherwise not have been found until 2012--disease, in other words, which would have festered and spread, undetected, for years.

But those in favour of a badger slaughter won't have it. They are adamant and impatient. TB numbers are rising, they say, so badgers must be to blame. Never mind the obvious

impact of tougher testing. And forget the recent past. So they choose to ignore also what happened after foot and mouth restrictions were lifted. But it's important.

Post foot and mouth, significant restocking took place in Wales from TB hotspots in England. Result: in two years the TB rate in Wales rose by more than 170 per cent. TB had been imported by the lorryload.

The Badger Trust has long argued that better, more frequent testing would root out the previously hidden reservoir of disease in herds which was sustaining and fuelling the epidemic. It's not merely the frequency of testing, but the effectiveness of the test. For decades the farming industry has been content to use a flawed test to detect a highly infectious disease. Time and again that test has failed to detect and remove for slaughter infected cattle. Worse still, aware of the test's limitations the industry resisted tougher testing (the parallel use of the more sensitive gamma interferon test) and compounded the problem by failing to insist on pre-movement testing which would have resulted in many fewer diseased cattle being moved to other farms and into previously clean areas. Badger Trust believes that this is essentially a self inflicted epidemic which has slowly worsened over decades because the real causes have been neglected until now. New measures now in place, but long overdue, must be given time to work. And they are beginning to work, as Elin Jones to her credit has announced.

Badger Trust believes that the so-called pilot study is not justified, it will not work and it cannot yield any valid scientific results. MAFF in its arrogance slaughtered badgers 30 years ago (see above) without any control systems in place. Now the Welsh Assembly proposes to do exactly the same. If the bTB figures fall, no-one will be able to say with any certainty why. The killing of badgers will take place alongside a raft of cattle measures, so it will be impossible to decide which actions made the difference. That's bad science and shameful, indefensible policy-making. The Welsh Assembly won't know whether this controversial experiment is working, neither will the taxpaying public. Why this lack of transparency?

We have other questions. Will the level of TB in neighbouring non-cull areas be monitored? We don't know. Elin Jones won't say. Those figures are important, for the findings of the randomised badger culling trial (RBCT) in England would suggest that TB in areas bordering the trial will rise. The pilot cull compares very unfavourably with the RBCT trial. Elin Jones proposes one cull area, the RBCT culled in 10 areas at broadly the same time. In both the RBCT in England and the Four Areas Trial in the Republic of Ireland the carcasses of slaughtered badgers were tested for TB. Elin Jones has ruled that out. So no-one will know how many of the slaughtered badgers were infected. Why?

Commonsense: bovine TB is a highly infectious respiratory disease. It passes readily from cow to cow. Increasingly in modern farming cattle spend months overwintering and fattening up, side by side, nose to nose, in often poorly ventilated cattle sheds. At markets they are packed together and for decades the very best of breeds have been taken to shows. Routinely every year tens of thousands are moved to new pastures and different farms. Every year cattle movements can be counted in the millions.

Commonsense cries out that this is a cattle management system designed to spread an infectious cattle disease, but it has taken Government directives in England to belatedly apply some sensible controls to root out previously undetected disease in herds and, at

the same time, to insist on pre-movement testing, albeit not on a sufficiently all-embracing scale.

Commonsense is in short supply where the pro-cull activists are concerned. They claim, without a shred of validated evidence, that the countryside is full of diseased badgers dying in agony. Some pro-cull farmers claim that simply by looking at badgers they can determine whether or not they are infected. Nonsense, all of it.

TB is rarely fatal in badgers and as the ISG cull showed even in TB hotspots fewer than two in 10 are infected. Most badgers are healthy. And while blood tests on live badgers can usually detect TB, only post mortem examination can provide absolute proof. False positives and false negatives remain an unfortunate feature of the current test for TB in badgers. One major questionmark remains about the alleged role of badgers in bTB. How do they infect cattle? The research carried out by the ISG concluded that cattle can infect badgers and that badgers can transmit TB to cattle. But how? No-one knows with any certainty. Badger Trust accepts the ISG's assertion, but awaits scientific proof. How it happens and how often could prove vital in determining the way this disease, which has a major impact on the farming community, and imposes a huge cost on the taxpayer, is brought under control.

- (1) *Figures vary year to year. But at the end of 2008, for example, Defra's published statistics show that over 91 per cent of herds were disease free.*
- (2) *The ISG advocates the use of dual testing: the current "live" test and the parallel use of the more sensitive gamma interferon test. This would be very much more effective than the single test which is at best 70 per cent effective.*

Ends...

Badger Trust is the only charity solely dedicated to the conservation of badgers across Great Britain.

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