

Monday 26th July

Subject: What the Minister failed to tell the farmers

For Immediate Release

The Agriculture Minister thinks "there is not a country in the world that's got rid of TB without addressing the problem in wildlife".

But there is. It was the UK, says the Badger Trust.

Mr James Paice was speaking at the Game Fair last week and seemed not to know that bovine tuberculosis (bTB) was reduced from 16,000 cases in 1961 to 628 by 1979 in an eradication scheme that did not include "addressing" – i.e. killing – wildlife [1]. The Coalition Government's manifesto envisages a "science-led cull", while Mr Paice told the farmers he had a "clear belief" a cull would help.

David Williams, chairman of the Trust, said: "There was no science behind Mr Paice's 'belief'. I am amazed that a politician in his position does not know how this textbook scheme worked. Gassing and other measures from 1975 did not reduce bTB from around 100 breakdowns a year up to 1985, nor prevent the increase since then. Almost ten years of rigorous study have shown that it would take comprehensive killing operations over many years in areas as big as Birmingham or Glasgow to achieve only short-term benefits, if any."

The relevant sentence in an authoritative document published last week in a peer reviewed scientific journal is: "Exploratory analyses stratified by six-month periods are consistent with an ongoing, but diminishing (test for temporal trend $p=0.037$), benefit of proactive culling continuing through the latest six-month period analysed (43 to 48 months post-trial) [2].

Mr Williams said: "No other industry could get away with killing huge numbers of wildlife for such transient benefits when so many other proven techniques are again yielding results, as now seems to be the case. We simply do not understand why the farming industry has been so obsessed with killing wildlife".

There were many omissions in Mr Paice's remarks as reported by the show's website. It did not refer to the encouraging bovine tuberculosis figures for the first quarter of this year (published this month). They show a ten percent fall in new herd incidents [3] and a drop of 24.3 percent in the number of cattle slaughtered [4]. More significantly, the Trust recently highlighted the six percent fall in herds confirmed as infected between the whole of 2008 and 2009, without any wildlife being "addressed".

The Minister could also have said that in Wales, where an intensive eradication programme (excluding badger culling) is in progress, the ratio of herds infected last year was one in 141, a vast improvement over 2008 when it was one in 104. The overall reduction in new herds confirmed was from 541 to 513, or five percent. Still no badgers killed.

Another omission was not to have told his listeners that in Dyfed, just over the border from where he was speaking in Powys, 13 percent fewer cattle were slaughtered in 2009 than in the previous year - and still no badgers killed. Dyfed is part of the area for a cull recently stopped by the Court of Appeal.

Yet another omission concerning the fall in bTB was a reference to the slaughter of 25,000 cattle in England last year [5] because of bTB. He failed to say that the comparative figure for 2008 was 27,455. The drop was seven percent – and no badgers killed.

He should also have mentioned that Scotland, thanks to rigorous cattle regulations, has now been given bTB-free status by the EU.

And finally he could have acknowledged that Northern Ireland has ruled out badger culling, although details of its proposed "prevalence study" are awaited.

Mr Williams added: "Mr Paice said it was his 'clear belief' that a cull was needed. 'Belief', whether clear or not, is simply not good enough in the face of £50 million-worth of rigorously tested science. For 40 years farmers have suffered from their industry's obsession with badgers and its stubborn resistance to proven cattle measures. Now, Mr Paice proposes to land them with the bill for the 'cull' he wants".

Ends

NOTES

[1] The main thrust of the Area Eradication Scheme of the postwar years was annual testing and rigorous controls on the movement of cattle. Relaxation of both these measures was followed by a massive surge in bTB from the mid-1980s. The rise was made worse by suspension of testing during the BSE and foot and mouth epidemics during the last decade, and restocking with untested cattle. *Eradication of Bovine Tuberculosis in Great Britain. By W D Macrae, MRCVS, DVM. Zoological Society of London from Symp, Zool. Soc., Lond. No. 4, pp. 81-90 (April, 1961).*

[2] <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0009090> (comment 4). July 22. The trial was the Randomised Badger Culling Trial of 1998-2007.

[3] Between Jan 1 and Mar 31: 1,378 against 1,543 in the same period last year.

[4] Between Jan 1 to Mar 31: 9,687 as reactors to the skin test, as inconclusives and direct contacts and reported by slaughterhouses against 12,807 in the same period last year.

[5] The exact figure was 25,557

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