



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
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Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 17 August on behalf of a number of your constituents about the badger cull. I apologise for the delay in replying. Defra is currently dealing with high volumes of correspondence due to COVID-19. Thank you for your understanding during this challenging time.

The Government's bovine TB (bTB) eradication strategy for England, published in 2014, is founded in science. It applies the lessons of our previous attempts to control the disease, as well as evidence from other countries around the world. We have considered the evidence from trials and policies implemented in the UK during the 1970s and, more recently, during the Randomised Badger Culling Trial between 1998-2005.

The cornerstone of our strategy is a policy of regular testing and rapid removal of TB-infected cattle from herds. We have also incrementally introduced tougher restrictions on cattle movements from herds at risk of infection and more sensitive tests. We have introduced measures to encourage greater risk management and provide more information about bTB for the keepers of cattle. We have also deployed TB controls in wildlife in areas where the disease in cattle, is linked to a reservoir of infection in badgers, and we have encouraged the adoption of new farm biosecurity measures to try to break the cycle of infection between cattle and badgers.

The UK benefits from world-leading scientific research and the Government believes that we should deploy our expertise to accelerate the development of a deployable cattle vaccine against bTB. While the candidate BCG vaccine will never provide full protection, it promises to be a valuable additional tool if deployed with a test to detect infected cattle among vaccinated cattle (DIVA test). Government scientists have now developed a candidate DIVA test, and we aim to secure marketing authorisations for both the vaccine and the DIVA test in the next five years.

The Government is also investing in more accurate and frequent testing of cattle so that we are able to detect the infection earlier and remove the reactor cows quicker. As a first step, in September 2020 we increased the frequency of routine surveillance testing in two counties which form part of the High Risk Area (HRA) – Shropshire and Staffordshire. We expect this to be extended to all parts of the HRA from 2021. Improving the efficacy of our cattle testing regime through better diagnostics is a key component of a successful strategy.

No one wants badger culling to go on forever. However, the scientific evidence shows that tackling the reservoir of infection in wildlife, chiefly badgers, needs to remain an important element of Defra's bovine TB eradication strategy for England. The Government's response to Professor Sir Charles Godfray's review noted that while it is important to retain the ability to introduce new cull zones where epidemiological evidence points to a reservoir of disease in badgers, we envisage that any remaining areas would join the current cull programme in the next few years and that the badger cull phase of the strategy would then wind down. Culling would, however, remain an option thereafter where epidemiological assessment indicates that it is needed.

That plan to wind down the current badger culling programme has not changed. As noted in the Government response to the Godfray Review, it is unrealistic to switch immediately to badger vaccination, but we are already doing a great deal to make sure the transition happens.

The evidence is clear that badger culling is working. An independent study demonstrated that the cull has resulted in significant reductions in the spread of the disease to cattle, showing reductions of 66% and 37% in the two areas analysed. Details can be found at <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-49957-6>.

In addition, the Animal and Plant Health Agency published data in September 2018 showing there had been a drop in TB incidence in the first two cull areas where the number of new confirmed breakdowns has dropped by around 50%. In Gloucestershire, the incidence rate has dropped from 10.4% before culling began to 5.6% in the twelve months following the fourth cull. In Somerset, it has dropped from 24% to 12%. The data can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bovine-tb-incidence-of-tb-in-cattle-in-licenced-badger-control-areas-in-2013-to-2017>.

Government policy has enabled farmers and landowners to apply for licences to cull or to vaccinate badgers. The policy was based on the Randomised Badger Culling Trial, which demonstrated that badger culling in areas where cattle TB is linked to TB in badgers could reduce TB in cattle compared to un-culled areas. Computer modelling suggested that culling in such areas worked faster than vaccination. In areas where culling has been successfully deployed to reduce the amount of TB infection, we are now proposing to increase deployment of badger vaccination to bank the benefits and enable a move away from culling. On 7 September 2020, Natural England published licences for areas that will undertake badger control operations in England this autumn. This includes the reauthorisation of licences for 33 existing areas alongside licences for 11 additional areas. All applications received were carefully assessed by Natural England to ensure that each cull company has suitable arrangements and plans in place to carry out an operation that is safe, effective and humane.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bovine-tb-authorisation-for-badger-control-in-2020>.

There is no single answer to tackling the scourge of bTB but by deploying a range of policy interventions, we can turn the tide on this insidious disease and achieve our long-term objective of eradicating it by 2038.

George Eustice

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