



**National
Trust**

Review of Bovine Tuberculosis

Submission to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development - 16 April 2012

The National Trust welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on the proposed thematic review of Bovine Tuberculosis (BTB) - "To explore all measures, including broad consideration of likely cost / benefit, that could be taken in Northern Ireland towards the reduction and eradication of Bovine Tuberculosis based on international and local experiences".

1.1 Introduction

As a conservation and environmental charity, the National Trust is responsible for the management of over 3,100ha of farmed land in Northern Ireland, the majority of which is managed on our behalf by over 80 farmers, through some 100 conacre licences. We are committed to helping to reduce the incidence of Bovine Tuberculosis not least because the cattle of at least a quarter of our 1500 tenant farmers across Northern Ireland, England and Wales are at risk from Bovine TB breakdowns. We also recognise the importance of the beef and dairy industry to the Northern Ireland, ROI, UK and North West Europe economies and we seek to minimise the risk to our tenant farmers' cattle herds of a Bovine TB breakdown.

The National Trust has a strong and long established relationship with Food & Environment Research Agency (FERA) and its predecessor, the CSL, in part because we own Woodchester Park in Gloucestershire where FERA conduct a long term study on badgers and Bovine TB. Furthermore we have contracted FERA staff to undertake our pilot badger vaccination programme at our Killerton Estate in Devon. We also recently facilitated a QUB's badger research project at one of our properties in Co Down.

We are aware that the incidence of bTb amongst cattle herds in NI has increased in the last six months and that the cause of this change is unclear.

1.2 National Trust Position Statement - Badgers and bovine TB – Summary

The National Trust strongly advocates the need for a comprehensive package of measures that serves to reduce cattle to cattle transmission, and transmission between cattle and wildlife especially badger populations. We recognise that there is little point in tackling one transmission route such as badger to cattle without tackling all the other routes such as cattle to cattle.

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We accept the results of the RBCT, as captured in the Final Report of Independent Scientific Group (ISG) that badgers contribute to the incidence of Bovine TB in cattle herds. However we also accept the ISG's conclusions that killing badgers to reduce this source of infection is fraught with difficulties and could be counterproductive because of perturbation: the social disruption to badgers that survive cull programmes that can result in increases in the risk of transmission of Bovine TB from badger to badger and badger to cattle. This means that for badger culls to be effective in making a significant reduction to the incidence of Bovine TB in cattle herds they would need to be over a large area (100 s of km squares), conducted efficiently over at least four years, and in areas with badger-proof boundaries. In practice there are likely to be few areas in Bovine TB hotspot areas in England, Wales or NI in which these criteria can be met.

So whilst we are not, in principle, against killing badgers to reduce Bovine TB in cattle herds (provided such culls were legal and the methods used were subject to agreed welfare standards), we judge that there will be few areas in which such culls can be carried out effectively. To present an alternative to killing badgers which does not cause perturbation and is known to effectively immunise badgers, we have decided to vaccinate badgers on the farms in one of our estates in a hotspot area in England.

2 Bio security measures;

There are two aspects to this: reducing contact and so transmission between infected and infectious cattle and non-infected cattle, and reducing badger/cattle contact.

We have been impressed by the procedures adopted in and around the Welsh Government's Intensive Action Area (IAA), where there is a presumption against moving cattle from known hotspot areas outside the IAA to within it.

In NI the conacre tenancy system results in a majority of farmers having several neighbours. This may increase the risk of contact between infected cattle and non-infected cattle across boundary fences, compared with in England or Wales, where farmers have fewer neighbours. So, a key to minimising contact between infected and non infected cattle in NI may be to increase bio-security around parcels of land leased through the conacre system

Contact between badgers and cattle occurs at feed and water points in buildings, and out on pasture. For the former, research conducted by Fera funded by Defra indicates that badger proof barriers can be effective but need to be maintained. This points to the need to bring about behavioural changes amongst farmers to make sure that, for instance, a badger proof gate has indeed been closed.

There is also the question of isolation of cattle testing positive and their immediate removal from the herd. The timings on this can vary. In Wales we note that the great effort to minimise the time reactor beasts remain on the farm has probably contributed to reductions

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in the rate of increase of BtB, and the rigour with which it is adopted sends a strong signal to the industry about the need for greater bio-security.

3 Vaccinations;

3.1 Badger Vaccinations

We recognise the significance of recently published scientific trials demonstrating that the vaccination of badgers is effective in immunising non-infected badgers, and slows down the rate of development of the disease in uninfected individuals. We understand from Fera that the effect of vaccination over four successive years on the trial badger population was to generate herd immunity. This means that vaccination had minimised the risk of badgers infecting cattle with BtB in the trial area. For these reasons, we are piloting vaccination of badgers over the next four years on 18 farms on our Killerton Estate in Devon, which is in a hot spot for Bovine TB. Our aim is to minimise the risk of badgers infecting our tenant's cattle with Bovine TB.

3.2 Cattle Vaccination

We believe that much more work is need in the development of a cattle vaccine and with the bTb issues now in France and Spain the opportunity is now there to look at the use of cattle vaccine within the experimental context. We welcome the development of a diagnostic test that will distinguish cattle that have been immunised against Bovine TB from those that are infected, and welcome research on the vaccination of cattle.

4 Dealing with TB in wildlife;

As stated earlier any approach any approach to manage TB in wildlife needs to be considered in tandem with management of TB in the cattle herd. As stated in 1.2 a widespread badger cull would potentially be cost prohibitive and will not necessarily deliver a comprehensive result. If there were proposals to reduce bTb in badger populations by catching, testing and culling individuals that test positive for the disease one possible consequence is perturbation (the disruption of the social organisation and behaviour patterns of individual badgers in a population), leading to an increased rather than decreased risk of badger to badger, and badger to cattle transmission. So if this were a option it would be important to assess the consequences of selective culling in terms of perturbation of badger populations and the consequently increased risk to cattle herds. Wales considered this option a few years ago, and commissioned scientists from FERA to model the perturbation risk from selective culling. The models indicated that selective culling can increase the risk of perturbation and so result in a higher incidence of herd breakdowns so it would be important to learn from the Welsh study.

It is also important to note that any intervention with wildlife (culling, selected culling vaccination or combinations of these) needs to be fully costed. In any option that involves killing badgers, it is important to cost in disposal of carcasses.

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5 Testing for Bovine TB;

We welcomed the introduction of mandatory Pre-movement testing in hotspots areas in England and Wales, and note that this has contributed to a measurable reduction in the incidence of Bovine TB amongst cattle herds. We also welcome the use of double testing (skin test and Gamma Interferon) in hot spot areas, given that the latter can detect infection at a very early stage in development of Bovine TB within the animal. However, we recognise that the resources for comprehensive use of double testing are unlikely to be available in the long term and accept that its use needs to be targeted to where it will make the most difference in reducing the risk of transmission between cattle.

6 Cattle movement;

We applaud the rigorous application of both cattle testing and use of the cattle tracking system APHIS in NI. Both are likely to have contributed to the reduction in Bovine TB in NI over the last decade. However, as we note above, we are concerned that cattle movements within the same holding in the conacre system may increase the risk of contact with neighbouring possibly infected cattle, and more needs to be done to prevent this happening.

7 Research into Bovine TB;

We positively support DARD for undertaking its Case Study project in a hot spot area in Co. Down which seeks to compare the attributes of farms that had a history of Bovine TB Breakdowns with those that did not. We understand that this study is still on going and we look forward to hearing the outcomes of this project later this year. In addition to the research outcomes we would emphasis the importance and value of this project in furthering relationships with individual farmers. We would like to see DARD build on these relationships in order to get more successful deployment and implementation of bio-security measures in the area.

8 Additional comments.

National Trust is aware that around £4 million is available to fund Bovine TB work in Northern Ireland and participated in a workshop hosted by DARD in late 2011 where a range of options and issues were debated with other key stakeholders including UFU, private and state vets, CNCC, AFBI, UWT and others. We felt that this focussed inclusive approach enabled frank and clear exchange of views from a range of perspectives and gave a collective view as to where those stakeholders saw the best use of research funds to be. Sadly there has been no follow up to this or communication as to what decisions have been made.

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