

Wildlife and Countryside Link position statement on badgers and bovine tuberculosis in England

July 2013

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together 41 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK and manage over 750,000 hectares of land.

This statement is supported by the following 10 organisations.

- Badger Trust
- Friends of the Earth
- Humane Society International/UK
- International Fund for Animal Welfare
- The Mammal Society
- People's Trust for Endangered Species
- Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- The Wildlife Trusts
- The Woodland Trust

1. Overview

Link acknowledges that bovine tuberculosis (bTB) in cattle is a serious problem in the UK, with the infection causing significant hardship within the farming community because of compulsory slaughter requirements, and the restrictions on trading. Tackling the disease in cattle is also costly, with current approaches to the testing and removal of infected cattle costing the taxpayer in the region of £91 million per year (2010-11 figures).

Given the significant impacts and costs associated with controlling the infection it is therefore imperative that a long-term solution is found that is:

- effective;
- cost effective;
- based on sound science;
- humane;
- publically acceptable.

2. Defra's emphasis on badger culling

Across the UK, the devolved countries are testing various approaches – all of which involve multiple measures. In England, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on tackling the “reservoir” of bTB in wildlife (i.e. badgers). This is being used to justify the inclusion of badger culling in a package of measures, an approach which has been licensed to commence this year, in the form of two pilot projects.

The two pilot culls intend to measure whether it is possible to reduce badger populations by 70% or more over a six week culling period in the zones, and whether it can be carried out humanely, safely and at low public cost through practical partnerships with the local farming industry. If the pilots are deemed to be successful in these regards, they could be followed by a wider roll out of this approach across larger hotspot areas for the disease, which could eventually cover up to 39,000 km² (approx. 25 - 30% of England)¹. These culls will be carried out by licensed shooters targeting the heart/chest areas of ‘free running’ badgers at night with shotguns and rifles (so-called ‘controlled shooting’), or by shooting cage trapped badgers in the head.

3. Link’s concerns

We have three key concerns over the Government’s current plans to cull badgers, as follows:

1. Scientific research² suggests that badger culling will have a marginal impact on the incidence or prevalence of TB in cattle (approximately 16% in the cull zone) and only if carried out effectively, and there is a significant risk that a cull will exacerbate the spread of the disease by disrupting and scattering badgers.
2. The method of killing badgers to be used (most predominantly ‘controlled shooting’) risks compromising the welfare of the targeted animals. However, the criteria and methodology that Defra intends to use to assess ‘humaneness’ have not been made public, so it is impossible to judge whether the assessments are likely to yield robust and credible outcomes.
3. The accuracy of the methodology being used to assess badger populations within pilot cull zones, on which the minimum and maximum numbers of badgers to be killed are to be based, has been seriously questioned by reputable independent scientists³⁴, raising concerns that inaccuracies could result in local badger extirpation.

4. Conclusion

Killing badgers is a costly distraction from the development of a more rigorous, effective and publicly acceptable approach to the control of bTB.

Defra should be guided by the best available scientific evidence and advice, and reconsider its policy of badger culling.

Instead, it should invest resources in developing a package of measures which is publicly acceptable and focusses on:

- tackling the transmission of the disease between cattle (e.g. through cattle movement restrictions);
- improving the testing/detection of the disease in cattle herds;

¹ Natural England (2011) The impact of culling on badger (*Meles meles*) populations in England and measures to prevent their ‘local disappearance’ from culled areas, supplementary advice provided under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 and Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).

² Final Report of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (2007)

http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/diseases/atoz/tb/isg/report/final_report.pdf

³ Donnelly, C.A. and Woodroffe, R. (2012) Reduce uncertainty in UK badger culling, Letters to Nature.

⁴ Guardian (2013) Counting the cost: fears badger cull could worsen bovine TB crisis

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2013/may/27/badger-cull-bovine-tuberculosis>

- minimising the spread of the disease in the badger population through vaccination of badgers;
- implementing biosecurity measures to separate badgers from cattle in and around farm buildings⁵;
- increasing immunity to the disease through the vaccination of cattle and high standards of cattle welfare.

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⁵ Natural England (2012) Badgers and bovine tuberculosis: on-farm biosecurity and badger exclusion measures (TIN106) <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/970479>