

The badger extermination or culling programme under consideration by the UK Government has no scientific justification, but is the result of relentless pressure from lobbying groups from the farming industry.

The Government is considering licensed and targeted culling of badgers despite the research findings of the Government-appointed Independent Scientific Group on Cattle (ISG). A scientific experiment undertaken by the ISG has shown that culling actually increases Bovine TB in cattle. Licensing farmers to remove badgers will result in erratic and sporadic killing.

Badgers, who have been persecuted for many years, are now protected by law in the British Isles. Yet large scale, blanket killing being considered would lead to local extinction of badgers, contrary to the provisions of the Bern Convention, which Britain has signed.

Following the Krebs's Report, the Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RCBT) was implemented in 1998 to evaluate different ways of culling badgers to see their effect on TB outbreaks. Ten sets of three test areas each measuring 100 km sq (triplets) were selected as part of an experimental trial to research the effect of different treatments. Each triplet set contained an area where badgers were left alone (No Cull), an area where badgers were killed only once an outbreak of TB in cattle had been detected (Re-active Cull), and an area where as many badgers as possible were killed (Proactive Cull).

Research has shown that badger culling is not an effective TB control measure unless badgers are exterminated from areas that exceed 300 squared kilometres. This is equal to twice the size of Greater London or 50,000 football pitches. A mass slaughter of this magnitude is neither practical nor cost-effective and would be unethical and unsustainable.

Badgers have been implicated in the spread of Bovine TB for the past 25 years. Despite badger culls on land where Bovine TB outbreaks have occurred - known as re-active culling - the incidence of Bovine TB has increased dramatically.

Scientific research has shown that this results in a 27% increase in cattle breakdowns (cattle diagnosed with Bovine TB). This is caused by disturbance within the badger population, manifest as increased movement and contact between individual badgers that have not been caught.

Pro-active culling creates a 20% reduction in cattle breakdowns in the areas where culling is carried out. However, badger movement on the perimeter of the culling areas increases the incidence of Bovine TB by 30%, thus exacerbating the disease problem considerably in the long term. Even with a 20% reduction in TB breakdowns in culling areas attributed to badger transmission, there still remains 80% transmission predominately attributed to cattle to cattle infection.

The third option of eradicating badgers over larger areas would be unworkable as it is impossible to gain access to more than 70% of land due to refusal of admission - who is going to go into school playing fields, private gardens and nature reserves to kill the badgers?

Even if it were possible, over a long period of time, to exterminate all badgers from an area, it would eventually be repopulated. If immigrants are very susceptible to Bovine TB, disease outbreaks would increase dramatically. Furthermore, Bovine TB is also evident in other wildlife species, such as deer, foxes, rats and moles.

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SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION



Professor John Bourne, Chairman of the ISG, has publicly stated that the Government's consultation paper contains inaccuracies in important respects. In particular, the ISG say, "there is solid scientific evidence that two of the culling strategies proposed will increase rather than decrease cattle breakdown rates and the consultation paper fails to make this finding clear."

We appreciate that the farming industry is experiencing a very serious problem. However, wasting even more money to satisfy the demands of a minority seemingly determined to ignore scientific facts is not a viable solution. Millions of pounds have already been spent on badger culls. It is time to put funding towards research that will deliver lasting benefits, namely the development of a cattle vaccine, movement controls and support for farmers, who may incur additional costs through stricter safeguards.

Indiscriminate wholesale killing of badgers across large areas will also bring death to many healthy individuals. Those with natural immunity will also be removed from the population, rendering it more vulnerable.

Furthermore, the methods used to kill badgers over large areas can cause immense suffering and are therefore inhumane. They include snaring, shooting and gassing. Gassing was discontinued in 1982 by the Government when it was found to be inhumane as it is impossible to get lethal concentrations of gas into all parts of the sett leaving animals only partially poisoned and suffering. Gassing will also affect other species, as it is impossible to tell which animals are in a sett at a given time. Rabbits, foxes, polecats and even otters could all become innocent victims of a poison gas campaign.

Cattle to cattle transmission is the main route of infection for Bovine TB. As a matter of priority, measures to address this primary disease risk must therefore be taken before a blanket kill of badgers should even be considered.

The remaining 80% of TB outbreaks is attributed mainly to cattle to cattle infection.

In line with other countries that attended the 4th International Conference on Mycobacterium Bovis in Ireland in August 2005 we should therefore:

- Introduce the interferon-gamma test alongside the skin test, thus increasing the sensitivity by 20% (20 cows in every herd of 100). This will now be used from February 2006 - four years after the ISG's recommendation for its national instigation.
- Pre-test cattle prior to transportation. This is about to be introduced, and should include all show cattle, market cattle (other than cattle going for immediate slaughter) and farm-to-farm movements. Post-movement testing would increase the possibility of picking up an infectious animal but is associated with financial implications and isolation problems that most farmers would not be able to contend with.
- Implement stringent movement controls, particularly in the South West, which experiences 13 million recorded cattle movements each year.
- Carry out skin tests by external agencies, which provide independent and uniform testing standards.
- Provide animal passport numbers to identify the specific animals to be seen rather than just an overall figure for the herd when a vet carries out a TB test.
- Offer cash incentives for meat processors to report TB infected animals in the food chain. (In the country where this was implemented, recorded reports increased by over 60%.)
- Provide more funding to improve testing and eventually develop a TB vaccine for cattle and badgers.

“There does need to be a far more aggressive focus on the cattle problem before one is going to see any decrease in the instance of the disease.”

**Professor John Bourne,
Chairman of ISG**

It is not possible to determine whether a badger is infected with Bovine TB by visual examination, or whether a sett is inhabited by infected badgers. Therefore existing plans put forward by the National Farmers' Union (NFU) for killing by lethal gas will inevitably lead to the death of thousands of healthy badgers and other non target species such as rabbits, polecats, foxes and even otters.

One option the Government is proposing is for individuals to be able to kill the badgers on their own land. This could lead to thousands of healthy wild animals being subjected to cruelty. Without laboratory testing it is impossible to tell whether a badger is Bovine TB positive. Bacteria found in latrines outside setts do not relate to infected animals underground. Yet, all too often farmers claim they 'know' which badgers or setts are infected with TB.

It will be impossible to identify who holds licenses for culling. The protection of the badger species will collapse and persecution by digging and baiting will return.

Not all farmers wish to gas, snare or shoot badgers on their land and would probably invite others to carry out these tasks. This would open the door for diggers and baiters that, even now, carry out illegal activities involving great cruelty and suffering as a result of stabbing, shooting, or baiting with dogs.