

Wildlife and Countryside Link statement on the forthcoming ISG report and recommendations to control Bovine tuberculosis in cattle

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation, enjoyment and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment. Our members practice and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and food production practices and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic environment and biodiversity. Taken together, our members have the support of over eight million people in the UK and manage over 476,000 hectares of land. This statement is supported by:

- Badger Trust
- International Fund for Animal Welfare
- The Mammal Society
- Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- The Wildlife Trusts
- The Woodland Trust

The Independent Scientific Group (ISG) is shortly to publish the final report on the Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RBCT) to the Secretary of State for the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The report will be used to help Defra implement policies that will reduce the prevalence of bovine tuberculosis (bTB) in cattle. This statement summarises Link's understanding of the published scientific results, and proposes what can be done to control bTB in the future.

The published results¹²³⁴ from the RBCT so far have demonstrated that:

- Reactive culling increased cattle TB incidence by 25%
- In the core of proactive culling areas cattle TB incidence went down 19%

¹ Christl A. Donnelly, Rosie Woodroffe, David R. Cox, F. John Bourne, Chris L. Cheeseman, Richard S. Clifton-Hadley, Gao Wei, George Gettinby, Peter Gilks, Helen Jenkins, W. Tom Johnston, Andrea M. Le Fevre, John P. McInerney and W. Ivan Morrison. Positive and negative effects of widespread badger culling on tuberculosis in cattle. *Nature* 439, 843-846, 2006, see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/tb/isg/pdf/nature04454.pdf>

² Rosie Woodroffe, Christl A. Donnelly, Helen E. Jenkins, W. Thomas Johnston, David R. Cox, F. John Bourne, Chris L. Cheeseman, Richard J. Delahay, Richard S. Clifton-Hadley, George Gettinby, Peter Gilks, R. Glyn Hewinson, John P. McInerney, and W. Ivan Morrison. Culling and cattle controls influence tuberculosis risk for badgers. *Proc. Nat. Ac. Sci.* 103, No. 40, 14713-14717, 2006, see <http://www.pnas.org/cgi/content/full/103/40/14713>

³ R. Woodroffe, C. A. Donnelly, D. R. Cox, F. J. Bourne, C. L. Cheeseman, R. J. Delahay, G. Gettinby, J. P. McInerney and W. I. Morrison. Effects of culling on badger (*Meles meles*) spatial organisation: implications for the control of bovine TB. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 43, 1-10, 2006, see <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/toc/jpe/43/1?cookieSet=1>

⁴ D. R. Cox, Christl A. Donnelly, F. John Bourne, George Gettinby, John P. McInerney, W. Ivan Morrison, and Rosie Woodroffe. Simple model for tuberculosis in cattle and badgers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, USA*, 2005, 10.1073/pnas.0509003102, 2005, see <http://www.pnas.org/cgi/content/full/102/49/17588>

- TB incidence in cattle rose by 29% at the edge of the proactively culled areas caused by the badger perturbation effect
- Therefore, at the scale trialled, there is no overall benefit from proactive culling
- Culling increases TB prevalence in badgers
- Control of TB in cattle leads to rapid decrease of TB prevalence in badgers

In addition, widespread badger control raises considerable practical, economic and conservation problems. Therefore badger culling cannot make a sustainable contribution to the control of bovine TB in the UK.

Cattle-to-cattle transmission is the dominant transmission factor in bTB in UK, as suggested by an independent review⁵. More must be done to control the spread of disease in the cattle population by implementing stricter testing regimes, such as introducing compulsory annual testing, implementing the wider use of gamma interferon tests, and introducing post movement testing. Also, Link agrees that more could be done in terms of introducing “potentially effective precautionary control measures which involve relatively low costs and are not controversial”⁶. This includes, but is not limited to, advice from the ISG and others about minimising badger access to cattle housing, cattle feed and water troughs.

Government investment is also needed to improve testing infrastructures and more constructive support for farmers badly afflicted by bovine TB, such as grants to help exclude badgers from farm buildings. Link also believes that any funding that was earmarked for a badger culling should be re-directed into the testing infrastructure and support for farmers.

Link encourages the Government to rapidly introduce an independently chaired bovine TB science advisory group, as recommended by the Science Advisory Council⁷. With the disbandment of the ISG there will be no source of independent scientific advice available for Government, from which they can make effective policy decisions.

Link, in line with advice from Defra’s Science Advisory Council believes that the Government should focus on the major factor, cattle-to-cattle transmission. Measures to minimise transmission from badgers, such as electric fencing around farm buildings require detailed scientific investigation and these measures need to be successfully implemented and their effectiveness assessed. Link urges the Government to continue to fund and pursue scientific research into the development of vaccines to combat bTB, which may represent a long-term measure in reducing and controlling bTB in Britain.

Link does not dispute that the scientific evidence that shows badgers and possibly other wildlife including deer, contribute to the persistence of bTB. However, the available scientific evidence clearly demonstrates that culling is not part of the solution.

The ISG has so far contended that in principle effective culling strategy would have to be over a wide spatial scale. One of the elements of the sustainability of any control,

⁵ Science Advisory Council, Independent review of research on bovine tuberculosis (bTB), see [http://www.defra.gov.uk/science/documents/papers/2005/SAC-TB%20\(05\)%204%20report%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/science/documents/papers/2005/SAC-TB%20(05)%204%20report%20FINAL.pdf)

⁶ See paragraphs 15 & 23, [http://www.defra.gov.uk/science/documents/papers/2005/SAC-TB%20\(05\)%204%20report%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/science/documents/papers/2005/SAC-TB%20(05)%204%20report%20FINAL.pdf)

⁷ SAC (07) 01, 12th meeting of the Science Advisory Council: 18 January 2007, available online at: [http://www.defra.gov.uk/science/documents/papers/2007/SAC\(07\)01ApprovedMinutes.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/science/documents/papers/2007/SAC(07)01ApprovedMinutes.pdf)

supported by Ministers, was that the widespread elimination of badgers from large tracts of countryside would not be politically or socially acceptable⁸. Moving to wide scale eradication brings with it a much wider range of political, economic and logistical problems, and also legal issues in terms of land-owner compliance. Widespread culling will also have a significant impact on the badger population, potentially turning the badger from a widespread species into a scarce, threatened one.

Link recommends a staged implementation of TB control measures, focusing first on cattle to cattle measures, followed by measures to minimise the small role played by badger-to-cattle transmission, such as electric fencing around farm buildings.

An appropriate amount of time and independent scientific advice must be given to evaluate the success of introducing pre-movement testing and gamma interferon tests. As a result, Link reiterates that in the current circumstances we do not support any moves to introduce any form of badger culling as a mechanism to control the spread of bTB. Link is looking forward to the findings of the ISG and their recommendations to Government, and hopes that the scientific evidence is used objectively to formulate future disease control strategy. Link hopes that the Government publicly accepts the findings of the research undertaken by the ISG.

Wildlife and Countryside Link
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⁸ The Veterinary Record (2000) 146,207-210