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A sustainable strategy for tackling TB in cattle and badgers

POLICY DOCUMENT 11/13/2007 (version 1)

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Soil Association briefing prepared following a Soil Association seminar and in advance of the Defra committee meeting of 24 October, 2007.

(Please also see [Soil Association special feature on bovine TB](#), originally published in Organic Farming magazine, autumn 2007)

The Soil Association accepts the findings of the latest Independent Scientific Group's (ISG) report, published 18/6/07, that badger culling is not the most effective or sustainable means to control bovine TB (bTB) - but this must not be used as an excuse for inaction.

The root causes and continued incidence of bTB are complex - no single factor, whether culling badgers or controlling cattle movements, could be the complete answer.

In June 2007, ahead of the publication of the ISG report, the Soil Association brought together a group of organic farmers (including those affected by bTB), vets, agronomists, dairy industry representatives and Soil Association staff to review the organisation's policy on tackling bovine TB and to consider constructive, practical ways forward.

We found agreement on some common principles and urgent actions for government:

Government must urgently move beyond polarised debate to investigate wider causes and possible solutions

The polarisation of the debate on whether or not to cull badgers has diverted vital effort and resources from investigating other factors - estimates are that £1000 has been spent for every badger killed.

Defra must redirect resources into other approaches for managing the disease, which address the underlying causes of its increased occurrence, and investigate potential practical measures for reducing livestock susceptibility.

Increased support should also be made available for affected farmers - given the economic and psychological impacts on farmers who have reactor herds can be devastating.

Official policy must shift from 'eradicating' disease to building positive health

Official attitudes to animal health and management of livestock diseases tend towards eradication of target diseases from the environment ('stamping out') or to achieving 'biosecure' conditions,

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in which it is attempted to prevent all exposure of livestock to potential pathogens.

Such approaches are not sustainable practically, economically or politically. A radical rethinking is required in official thinking with a new emphasis on creating 'positive health' in livestock. Nevertheless, we accept that strict measures should remain in place to contain the further spread of the disease.

Investigate why some farmers appear to have 'beaten bTB' through practical management strategies

Trace element deficiencies, especially of selenium, have been linked to the incidence of diseases, including bTB. A significant body of farmers, organic and non-organic, have 'remineralised' their soils using trace elements, with apparent success in reducing susceptibility to or breaking the cycle of bTB infection.

It is common knowledge that maize, widely fed to cattle, is low in selenium and other trace minerals. Many farmers supplement their cattle to balance these deficiencies. Research should be conducted into investigating any links with the increased growing of maize as fodder and the spread and incidence of bovine TB in both cattle and badgers (which feed on maize cobs where they can).

Some farmers, with veterinary advice, have treated both their cattle and the badgers present on their farms with mineral supplements. The focus on badger culling to control bTB has polarised the farming community and wildlife conservation bodies. This approach offers opportunities for constructive collaboration - for example in distributing such mineral supplements around badger setts.

The above practical approaches, potentially available to all livestock farmers, have been largely ignored by officials, despite achieving apparently beneficial and sustained results.

Investigate why some regions remain bTB-free

There are unexplained anomalies across the UK in the presence and absence of bTB 'hotspots' - for example, the Cheshire Plain, a major dairying area has not been subject to widespread bTB outbreaks. Research should be directed at identifying what factors are different there to other dairying areas affected by bTB.

Wider husbandry issues

TB in cattle or badgers, as in humans tends (but not exclusively) to affect stressed animals with suppressed immune systems - breed type, husbandry practices, housing and diet are factors that merit more research as to susceptibility and resistance.

The trend towards bigger dairy herds composed of cattle breeds developed for increased milk-yield above all else is acknowledged by some vets to be a possible factor in susceptibility to outbreaks. We have heard of some very large units, where herds of up to 1000 cattle are regularly moved and spread between over a dozen different farms during their lifetime. Some vets consider such management systems create perfect conditions for the spread of disease through stress and multiple contacts.

Published research supports this theory that bovine TB may be more closely correlated with the husbandry system and thus animals' susceptibility, rather than just exposure to the pathogen per se. The UK Agriculture Select Committee cited such research in 2001, suggesting that improvements in animal husbandry could be significant in reducing bTB - see: Griffin JM, Haahes T, Lynch K, Salman MD, McCarthy J, Hurley T, 1993, The association of cattle husbandry practices, environmental factors and farmer characteristics with the occurrence of chronic bovine tuberculosis in dairy herds in the Republic of Ireland, Preventive Veterinary

Greater research into this factor is needed, given the ongoing economic pressures on dairy farmers to run larger herds of high-yielding cows.

Culling badgers

The latest ISG report confirmed previous findings that, *'there is little evidence to support the view that proactive culling could provide a substantial contribution to control'* of bovine TB (bTB) in Great Britain, and that reactive culling of badgers *'may well be counterproductive'*. Given the ISG's unequivocal conclusion that, *'...badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB in Britain'*, it seems unlikely that the government will go against the scientific evidence.

Whilst the Soil Association concurs with the findings of the ISG report that cattle are themselves are, *'likely to be the main source of infection'*, there seems little doubt that badger to cattle infection occurs as well as the other way round. The scientific evidence is that any reactive culling of badgers is likely to increase spread of bTB. There is an old farming adage, *'never kill a good badger'* that supports the scientific evidence here. The only justification for killing badgers to control bTB would be if it were possible to identify live badgers that carry the disease - so following the same principle as with cattle.

Vaccination

Whilst prioritising husbandry that maximises positive health in livestock, the Soil Association welcomes the reported more imminent availability of an effective vaccine for both cattle and badgers. The availability of a vaccine would take pressure off both farmers and wildlife in the short-term, whilst long-term research is undertaken into building a national herd with naturally robust immune systems.

Status of Bovine TB as an animal disease

The Soil Association recognises the need to manage and minimise incidence of bovine TB and accepts that if left unchecked animal welfare and human health issues could arise, but government policy on controlling bovine TB appears to be as influenced by trading, economic and political factors as health and welfare.

ENDS

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