

Conclusions and recommendations

The subgroup congratulates the Irish authorities on the many improvements made in the TB programme during the last decade.

The commitment to the goal of final eradication of bovine TB and the comprehensive approach to the problems are applauded. The holistic approach to the TB problem has made it possible to identify major issues and deal with them accordingly.

In particular, the submission rates for lesions detected at routine slaughter and the continuous use of data collected in the programme for identifying issues, analysing results etc. is appreciated. The use of performance indicators allows for follow-up and actions as problems arise. These activities should continue so that any problems are identified early and the efficiency of actions is ensured.

The quality control activities are to be commended and should also continue and be developed as they are essential for the efficiency of the programme.

The IT support systems that have been developed are excellent and allow for continuous monitoring of programme performance as well as efficient information and maximises the use of all resources including minimising staff deployed in the programme. It appears that the resources, including staff, are now optimised as far as possible for maintaining efficiency.

The routine for reactor herds, with "desktop epidemiology" investigations and visits from department staff for field quality control and epidemiology is also commended and should be maintained. It is important that the use of veterinarians in the more serious outbreaks is also continued. The epidemiological investigations play a very important part in the success and are essential for the continuous efficiency of the programme.

The decision to impose a movement ban on intermediate reactors is also encouraged. This may in practice, in the future, lead into the severe test interpretation being applied in all herds when the situation allows.

Additional comments and recommendations for further improvement of the TB programme:

The group finds the categorisation of high risk herds and areas, respectively, somewhat inconsistent as it appears that high risk areas may include low risk herds. If an area is categorised as high risk this must have some impact on the perceived herd risk. We would recommend that the different risk categories be used in a more hierarchical manner so that all herds in high risk areas are defined as high risk and that efforts are focused in preventing spread from high risk areas into low risk areas. This applies at herd level as well, where the focus is on protecting free herds and preventing spread from high risk herds. Consequently it is recommended that the current testing strategies (as regards higher frequency and more severe test interpretation) in high risk herds and contiguous herds be maintained. Moreover, these testing strategies may be extended to all herds in the high risk areas, to be defined on an epidemiological basis (as a logical consequence of all herds in high risk areas being categorised as high risk herds). In the same context, it is important to monitor all the potential sources of infection. The badger studies should be carried out as planned and the activities as regards badger control continued and monitored.

Moreover, animal movements between free herds of different risk categories should be monitored to detect any emerging risks that need to be dealt with. To protect the free herds in low risk areas, the introduction of some type of "high risk pre movement testing" (when moving animals from non-restricted high risk herds to low risk herds) could be considered. This would help protect the free herds and thus decrease herd incidence rate (as most of the positive herds each year are in fact new ones).

The group realises that it may be too soon to aim for any free regions, as the TB prevalence in the badger population is quite significant even in low risk areas. However, if the strategies for controlling TB in badgers continue to work it will be useful to start planning for how to obtain (and maintain) regional freedom in some areas.

The slaughterhouse submission rates are satisfactory but it is recommended to look into the details of slaughterhouse submissions so that it can be determined what lesion rate would be the baseline (in the absence of TB). The number of submitted lesions where other causative agents are identified would give an indication of this.

Paratuberculosis does not appear to have an impact on tuberculin test performance at the moment but it is recommended that the paratuberculosis situation be monitored continuously to ensure that the prevalence of this infection does not affect the sensitivity of tuberculin testing in the future.

The continuous evaluation of testing data is encouraged as this will provide a solid basis for any changes in test interpretation or test application. If relevant, severe interpretation of the tuberculin test and/or single testing with only bovine tuberculin may then be applied where needed.

As the epidemiological unit is identified as the herd and every holding only contains one herd it is questionable that different testing strategies may be used in different animal groups in the same herd, although the restrictions apply to the entire herd.

The general principle is to use the same testing strategy (e.g. ancillary tests, severe interpretation, single test) in the entire epidemiological unit. This applies to restrictions, epidemiological investigations, backward and forward tracing of the infection as well.

If the epidemiological investigation justifies a differentiation of the risk for different subsets of the herd, different control/eradication measures may be used for different groups of animals (e.g. partial slaughter of the herd).

If different subsets of an epidemiological unit are tested differently, e.g. ancillary tests only used in one group of animals, the detection sensitivity will be different in different groups of animals and this may lead to false conclusions about lower risk in animals that are tested less intensively. In such cases it is preferable to apply the ancillary tests to all animals and combine all data from testing and epidemiological investigation to determine what animals are high risk and thus must be subject to more severe eradication measures.

It is recommended that the principle of applying investigation measures to the entire epidemiological unit be enforced, while still allowing for differential handling of subsets of the herd that are determined to be at different levels of risk, based on the investigations.

It is also recommended that the case of the explosive outbreak with zoonotic spread that was presented at the meeting be described in publication so as to emphasise the zoonotic aspects of TB. This may be very useful in awareness campaigns for farmers and veterinarians.

The performance of PCR tests and their potential use for further improvement of the control should be continuously evaluated.