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“The latest bleak incidents have shown quite starkly on-farm deaths will tear families and farms apart. And for those who survive on-farm accidents, the scars will always be there as a constant reminder to a hellish incident which, quite often, could have been avoided.”



Thursday, 14 August 2014

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Ben Briggs, News and business editor.

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Defra drawing up plans for new national TB fund in England

31 January 2014 | By [Alistair Driver](#)



DEFRA is considering the establishment of a new national bovine TB (bTB) fund which would contribute towards the cost of any future badger culls and compensation for farmers hit by the disease.

Alongside the new fund, which is likely to be voluntary for cattle farmers, the Department is keen to establish a new independent body to take over responsibility for much of the administration of TB policy, including badger culling.

The idea of a separate TB body with responsibility for a budget paid into by farmers, based on the system in place in New Zealand, was presented in Defra's 25-year draft TB strategy document, published in July.

Defra Secretary Owen Paterson is understood to be preparing to make an announcement on a new model for the governance and funding of TB policy in England in the spring, alongside his decision whether the badger cull policy will be rolled out to new areas.

He is waiting on the report of the Independent Expert Panel, which monitored last year's pilots in Somerset and Gloucestershire, before making his decision on the roll out.

Defra has considered the option of a compulsory levy on cattle farmers to fund future TB policy but it is understood this has been met with resistance by the Treasury due to question marks over its legality.



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The more likely option is therefore some sort of voluntary fund that farmers pay into, possibly match-funded by Government. This fund, according to industry sources, could cover some of the costs of new badger cull schemes, alongside contributions from farmers in the cull areas, if the roll out gets the green light.

It could also entitle cattle farmers who pay into the fund higher compensation levels for animals slaughtered because of TB than they would otherwise be entitled to.

The fund would be controlled by a new 'independent' national TB body, membership of which would include representatives of cull areas and farming and veterinary bodies, alongside civil servants.

It would take over much of the delivery of TB policy, dealing with technical issues like licensing and legal matters but, according to National Beef Association TB spokesman Bill Harper, key decision-making powers would remain with Ministers.

Industry contribution

"We support the setting up of an independent TB body to sit between Defra and farming groups. We also support a national fund as the cull roll out needs to be supported by the wider cattle industry, but it must be match-funded by Defra," Mr Harper said.

The need for a wider industry contribution, allied with greater ownership of the policy by farmers and vets, is driven by a number of factors.

One is the massive pressure on Defra's budget. According to the TB strategy document Defra is forecasting spending £95 million on bTB in 2014/15 against an allocated budget of £75m. It can no longer afford fund TB policy in the way it does now, particularly if badger culling is rolled out more widely.

But allied this is the feeling, based partly on visits by Mr Paterson and civil servants to New Zealand and the recommendations of Michael Seals' Animal Health and Welfare Board, that TB can only be tackled with genuine partnership between Government and industry.

Another factor is the concern of the NFU that too much of the cost and administrative burden of the pilot culls falls have fallen on its shoulders and on the farmers in the cull areas.

The NFU has financially underwritten the Somerset and Gloucestershire badger cull pilots, which NFU president Peter Kendall acknowledged had cost more than originally anticipated, and has played a major role in the preparation and delivery of the controversial projects.

Mr Kendall said the NFU's finances were in good shape and were able to absorb the cost.

He said: "I am more worried about the drain on time and professional staff and the exposure of them to some of the bullying that has gone on."

"We need to find urgently an industry solution to this. We are in the process of looking at the long-term financial structure to run this.

What we can't have is a long-term open-ended commitment (to future culls) – that is not the day job of the NFU. I don't think it's right that the costs should fall entirely on farmers in the cull areas either.

"So we need to look at a New Zealand-style solution to funding the TB programme. We need to have some sort financing mechanism, with people involved in the industry taking responsibility. We want professionals in there running policy on a day-to-day basis."

There is concern within the industry over the timetable for any new culling areas in 2014. With no clear indication of when Mr Paterson will

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make his announcement, the new areas will have their work cut out to get licensed and prepared in time.

Badger cull roll out

While the policy permits up to 10 new areas to be licensed each year Mr Kendall said the NFU was 'not looking for a roll out on the scale some people previously envisaged', suggesting only a small number of new areas would come forward this year. "We need to be very careful about the speed of the roll out to make sure we get it right," he said.

He said the NFU was 'pushing quite hard' to ensure the policy is extended and to secure changes to the rules around it to make it more manageable for farmers. But he said much would depend on the IEP's findings as to what Mr Paterson decided.

Mr Harper also called for a 'clear plan from the Minister as soon as possible' on the whole package of measures including the cull roll out and the funding and governance of the policy.

A Defra spokesperson said: "Our draft bovine TB eradication strategy set out a range of options for a new approach for the funding and governance of TB controls in England.

"Private sector leadership remains an essential element and we are continuing to talk to the farming industry and other interested groups about how best to create a long-term solution to oversee plans to eradicate this disease."

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Industry views

THE broad principle of spreading the funding of TB more widely and handing responsibility appears to have support, or at least acceptance, among farmers although there are already dissenting voices.

But, with the plans still being formulated by Defra with stakeholders, there is set to be much debate about how the new system works.

Two issues stand out. One is whether a voluntary funding system can work and the other is the extent to which the new body will be able to 'take the politics out of TB'.

The idea was widely discussed at the NFU hustings in Devon this week. Those inside and outside the hotspot areas were supportive of a national TB fund.

Asked about a national fund, Thomas Binns, the Lancashire NFU council delegate, said: "The reality is that is where we are going."

But he said he was not in favour of a voluntary approach and questioned whether the fund could be partly taken from other promotional levy funds farmers already pay into. He said cattle farmers in most parts of England were already 'caught up with the costs of TB'.

"Defra's budget is continually being cut and if we want to get on top of this, we have inevitably got to pick some of the cost," he said.

Devon county chairman David Horton said it was 'only fair' to spread out the costs of badger cull policies. "We need buy in nationally. It would be great to get the buy-in of all livestock people," he said.

NFU vice president Adam Quinney, from Warwickshire, and Yorkshire farmer Rosey Dunn both voiced strong support for the new TB body but said they wanted it to make the big political decisions.

"We need to take these decisions on animal health away from politicians. How we do it is incredibly difficult," he said.

He said there was no point the industry simply being handed the current system, which he said was 'not workable and too

expensive'. "What I want to do is create a new system. But I have to be part of a whole plan, not a 25-year mystery tour. I think it would be better to start from scratch in the new body which is funded by the whole industry," he said.

Gloucestershire NFU chairman Andrew Guest said the key to the new body would be to 'de-politicise' TB policy. But he said he would be 'reluctant to consider a levy in case it gets broadened to cover other issues'.

British Veterinary Association president elect John Blackwell supported the principle of a new TB body, which he said would build on existing Defra-industry bodies like AHWBE and the TB Eradication Advisory Body. He said a new TB body could potentially deliver a 'co-ordinated approach with all the stakeholders brought into it'.

But Tenant Farmers Association chief executive George Dunn said it was unrealistic to expect the Government to 'let go' of a controversial policy like badger culling.

"We need to look very carefully to make sure we are just not setting ourselves up as another talking shop," he said.

He is also opposed to the idea of collecting money from farmers to fund TB policy. "The reason we are in this mess is down to years of and years of Government inactivity so the industry should not be asked to pay more money towards TB control. That is the responsibility of Government," he said.

What Owen Paterson said in the Defra TB strategy

"The key element for success drawn from other countries is a partnership approach to governance, funding and delivery of eradication programmes with farmers making the key implementation decisions and significantly contributing to the costs of these.

"In New Zealand an independent, farmer-led body, jointly funded by industry and government has been responsible for oversight and implementation of the eradication strategy.

"This includes decisions on compensation rates, conditions, testing requirements including who pays, and rules for cattle movements.

"I am absolutely clear that if we are to tackle this disease successfully, we need to work together, whilst recognising respective responsibilities for Government and Industry both in terms of what we do and how we pay for it. We need dialogue with industry on this. The consultation we are launching provides a perfect opportunity to have this dialogue."

The [strategy document](#) goes on to say...

"The Government will develop proposals for governance, delivery and funding of the Strategy in partnership with stakeholders. It will consult further on detailed proposals and carry out impact assessments as appropriate.

"Any changes to governance or delivery would need to comply with EU law and take account of wider impacts on the Government's capability to respond to animal disease outbreaks. Any changes to funding would need to comply with HM Treasury rules on managing public money."

The New Zealand model

In New Zealand, control of bTB has just been fully devolved to an industry-led body and limited company TBfree New Zealand.

The TB control budget is co-financed between Government and industry, including levies of NZ\$11.50 (about £6) on slaughtered

adult cattle and NZ\$0.01 (about 0.5p) per kg of milk solids.

A combination of tight cattle controls and a farmer-led cull of possums have resulted in the number of annual breakdowns falling from 1,700 in the mid-1990s to 66 in 2012.

While the UK farming and veterinary industries appear enthusiastic about the approach, Gareth Enticott, a senior lecturer in Cardiff University who has carried out extensive research on TB policy in New Zealand and the UK, said there was no guarantee it would work in England.

He said there were 'big differences' in the way the programme was developed in New Zealand. He said partnership was there from the start when TB eradication boards were established in the 1960s, while farmers knew they had no option but to share the cost when the Government removed virtually all subsidies in the 1980s.

It was also easier to get national buy-in because the disease was nationwide in New Zealand, unlike in England where it falls heavily in certain regions, he added.

Dr Enticott also questioned whether Defra would be sufficiently prepared to 'let go' on controversial policy areas like badger control.

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