

Oral badger vaccine plans hit by major setback

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GOVERNMENT plans to develop an oral badger TB vaccine, seen by many as the only feasible long-term alternative to a badger cull, have suffered a massive setback.

[Defra](#) is understood to have conceded that the vaccine may now never reach the market and is, at best, 'many more years away' than had been anticipated until recently.

Government researchers, led by Defra's Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) have been working on developing an oral badger vaccine for many years.

Initial trials, based partly on products and methods developed in New Zealand and Ireland, were seen as 'promising' and led scientists to cite 2015 as the 'best case scenario' for the development of a successful vaccine.

But 'disappointing' results in more recent trials have thrown these plans into disarray.

Two major barriers have emerged. Administering vaccines orally is far more difficult than via injection. The researchers have failed so far to find a formulation for the product that can survive long enough once digested by badgers to take effect.

The other big difficulty has proved to finding a bait that only badgers will eat. The effect would be diluted if another animals ate the bait and it would be a major problem if cattle did so, as this would affect the TB skin test.

In light of this, Defra is set to update its position to acknowledge that the setbacks have, at best, put back the possibility of a usable oral vaccine by 'many years' from the 2015 goal, meaning the prospect of anything being available before 2020 now appears slim.

Farmers Guardian understands that Defra will also admit that there is now no guarantee its researchers will ever be able develop an oral vaccine that works well enough to be licensed.

An oral vaccine is considered to be a far more effective tool than the injectable badger vaccine and has been described as the 'holy grail' of TB control.

The injectable Badger BCG vaccine is currently licensed and will be deployed in separate projects by Defra, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and the [National Trust](#) this year.

However, its potential for widespread usage as a disease control is limited by what Defra describes as its 'many practical constraints'. The Department has always seen the injectable vaccine as a 'stepping stone' until a more effective oral vaccine becomes available.

The third strand of bTB vaccine research, a cattle vaccine is also still considered to be 'many years' from fulfilment.

While Defra has developed a cattle BCG vaccine and a test to differentiate vaccinated and infected animals, this still needs final validation and licensing. There will also need to be new EU legislation to allow the use of cattle vaccination in the UK, as well as changes to trade rules.

The blow emerged as Defra Ministers were preparing to make an announcement on a licensed badger cull in England, now expected early next week.

Opponents of badger culling have always argued that planned badger culls in England and Wales should be abandoned in favour of the development of an effective TB vaccination strategy.

John Royle, the [NFU's](#) senior farm policy adviser, said the oral vaccine setback was 'bad news' for farmers as it had the potential to be a 'very effective' TB control over the next few years, particularly as 'an exit strategy' from culling.

He said the injectable vaccine had little potential for widespread deployment due to the 'very, very high costs and impracticality of using it' and questions about its efficacy.

But he said the news reinforced the need for a badger cull to control bTB in wildlife.

However, the National Trust and the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust have both said they want to use their experience of injectable badger vaccination this year to demonstrate that the policy can be an alternative to culling.