

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

# The Bovine TB Eradication Advisory Group (TBEAG) for England

## Eighth TBEAG meeting – 18 February 2013

February 2013

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# 1. Introduction

The Chairman welcomed members to their eighth meeting and thanked the Head of the Bovine TB Programme, who was attending his last meeting, for his support; and welcomed his successor to his first meeting.

There were apologies for absence from Matt Dobbs and Jan Rowe.

The Secretary asked for final comments on the minutes of the seventh meeting and the changes were agreed. The amended minutes would be published on the Defra website.

Members declared interests in the papers concerning the badger vaccination fund, TB testing; and OTF status in the low risk area.

Defra's TB Programme (TBP) reported that:

- The badger control project board had recently met for the fourth time and the project was continuing to press ahead with its preparations. The Secretary of State has reaffirmed his commitment to badger control. He has visited farmers in the Gloucestershire area and has plans to visit the Somerset area in March. He will use his speech to the NFU conference to again reaffirm this commitment.
- The EFRA select committee inquiry into vaccination against bovine TB continues. Staff from Fera gave evidence last week and the Minister of State gives evidence on 19 March. TBP is pressing ahead with scoping work on possible field trials of cattle BCG vaccination. Funding for such trials is not currently allocated, so a business case would need to be made in due course.

In discussion a member raised the issue of an owner of an AFU with grazing in one of the pilot cull areas who had not signed up to the cull, which meant that there was the possibility of higher risk cattle undermining the disease control benefits of the cull. TBP would look further at how such issues should be dealt with if and when culling is further rolled out.

## 2. Strategy

### **Officially TB Free (OTF) Regional Status [Paper 08-01]**

The paper described the advantages and disadvantages of OTF status in the Low Risk Area (LRA). It concludes that achieving OTF status for counties within the LRA would provide formal recognition of its risk status and reinforce the objective of keeping disease out. Potential advantages include: strengthening resolve to keep disease out thereby avoiding additional disease costs; demonstrating progress on eradication; the opportunity for a risk-based reduction in the burden of routine herd surveillance testing; and the promotion of international trade. Potential disadvantages include: opposition from farmers in the HRA; the possible need to tighten controls on cattle moving into the LRA from higher

risk areas, which is already under consideration; and additional data reporting requirements.

In discussion members questioned the trade implications for farmers in the high risk area and noted the risk of the creation of a two tier market. Members questioned whether EBLEX might be able to help explore this further. Members also questioned the strength of desire on the part of the EU for England to move to OTF status. TBP confirmed there was a strong desire from the European Commission for a move to OTF status as quickly as possible and that regions declaring OTF could be a potentially important milestone.

TBEAG agreed the proposal in principle but asked to know more about the possible trade implications.

### **Action**

TBP to approach EBLEX on trade implications of OTF status in the LRA.

## **Paper outlining possible levies [Paper 08-02]**

The paper set out two possible levy options: a slaughter/milk levy; and a general levy on all cattle keepers together with a high level assessment of these options against the criteria previously agreed by TBEAG and a detailed analysis of the pros and cons of the two options. It concludes that neither ideally fits the TBEAG criteria. Legal advice is that both options require changes to primary legislation.

The discussion exposed different views to the proposition of a levy: on one hand it was challenged as: taxation under another guise; increased 'red tape' and costly; on the other, given the overarching need to eradicate TB and that insurance was seen as a less likely option there was a need to continue to look closely at possible levy options. Members agreed that there was a need to look for ways of delivering a levy but in a manner that would be acceptable to government, transparent and fraud proof.

The Chairman in summarising the discussion concluded that there is a need to keep the levy option on the table, as a means of delivering a long-term funding solution whereby the industry would partner the taxpayer. The issues of bureaucracy and cost would need further consideration.

TBEAG agreed that the levy option needed to be retained and developed further.

## **Paper outlining possible insurance strategies [Paper 08-03]**

The paper presented a number of insurance options for TBEAG's consideration including: voluntary private insurance; mandatory insurance; a state run scheme; state subsidised private sector insurance; and a self-sustaining fund.

Members reflected on their personal experiences in seeking to obtain insurance; and while it could mean a wider range of farmers contributing there was concern that the insurance industry does not want to get involved because of unquantifiable risks and the industry's lack of control.

While TBEAG's view was that this was not an option worthy of much further work, TBP explained that it was one that other parts of Government were likely to want kept on the table for the time being at least.

### **3. Edge area – plan update [Paper 08-04]**

The paper reminded members that TB surveillance changes (annual herd testing frequency) have already been rolled out, and certain edge-area specific measures such as mandatory interferon-gamma testing in OTFW breakdowns are being implemented. Defra is also working to prevent re-establishment of the CTS links that were 'broken' last summer and prevent new ones being granted. TBEAG was invited to agree to a staged roll out, starting with some lower cost measures if and when the resources could be found. The remaining measures would be introduced as part of the delivery of the wider strategy. The staged roll out would need to be supported by a communications plan to ensure farmers and vets were clear about what was being delivered and when. An additional paper with an initial cost benefit analysis for the work was also tabled.

In a wide-ranging discussion a number of key issues were covered:

- the application of 3km radial testing and the potential burden on farmers adjacent to outbreaks, where it was agreed that there was a need for local discretion to cap the number of such tests. Consideration of the potential benefits from this testing needed further work;
- timing of implementation of measures and the availability of AHVLA resources for the roll out of the initial measures. 1 July was possible, subject to Defra being able meet the additional costs to AHVLA and AHVLA resourcing constraints
- badgers: whether other measures such as badger vaccination should be prioritised rather than radial testing; the further work being done to improve the sensitivity of PCR testing in badgers and sett level interventions; and understanding the relative roll of cattle and badgers in the disease process.
- Consultation and communication with the industry including publishing the edge map, bio-security events and other specific measures

TBP reminded members that there was not as yet funding in place for the edge area measures and while a business case could be made it was not possible to predict whether an additional allocation would be granted.

## **Action**

Send members an electronic copy of the initial cost benefit analysis

Send members a paper with details of PCR and sett level intervention work

## **4. Badger Vaccination Fund – Revised Criteria [Paper 08-05]**

The paper explained the background to the fund and that area grants are currently limited to the badger control areas. In the light of TBEAG's discussion on the edge area the paper proposed extending the scope of the competition for the badger vaccination fund grant and re-prioritising eligibility for grant funding from 2013/14 to include: (i) the badger control area (ii) the edge area (iii) the rest of annual testing area.

The paper also proposed that the grant to VCS sector workers and volunteers for training lay vaccinators should continue.

In discussion members accepted the case for extending the scheme in the way described but also asked TBP to consider how funding could be applied more strategically to ensure greater coordination between applicants in delivering a more joined-up approach to badger vaccination.

## **Action**

Send members a copy of the revised badger vaccination grant fund competition rules

## **5. Improving cattle testing and the interim findings of the Gamma Interferon policy review**

### **Improving the sensitivity of the cattle testing regime [Paper 08-06]**

The paper asked TBEAG to consider and give a steer a range of potential modifications to the current cattle TB testing regime that could be used on their own or in combination to: (a) improve the detection of infected cattle herds during routine surveillance (or targeted) testing for bovine tuberculosis (bTB); and/or (b) reduce the risk of leaving infected cattle in herds when they regain OTF status after a bTB breakdown. The veterinary advice is to prioritise the roll out as soon as possible a formal, structured programme of routine and targeted audits of skin testers across GB; along with greater (but still targeted) deployment of the supplementary interferon-gamma (IFN- $\gamma$ ) blood test in infected herds (OTFW breakdowns) in the high risk area of England.

The discussion exposed a number of practical testing issues such as identifying the proportion of truly infected animals that are currently missed by surveillance and that there are probably regional variations in these data. The auditing of testers similarly highlighted the links to the OV services procurement project run by AHVLA and whether any system of quality control of TB testers should not be best aligned to that project.

### **Action**

Visit the options again at the next meeting.

## **Use of interferon-gamma testing [Papers 08-07 and 08-08]**

The two papers summarised: (a) the Diagnostics Program Advisory Group's (DPAG) 21 recommendations on the use of the interferon-gamma blood test in cattle; and (b) TBP's review on how better use could be made of the test within the constraints of existing resources .

A wide ranging discussion included whether it was sensible for Defra's review to consider the optimal use of the test as a disease control tool and then come up with the necessary additional funding to support it, or simply how existing interferon-gamma testing resources could be better targeted. That involved differentiating the approach in the high and low risk and edge areas, as well as according to cattle type (i.e. breeding animals rather than those being finished). TBP suggested that it was important to take some early steps to get better value for existing resources, which is a point that was made in the internal review paper which would be made available to TBEAG once complete. [There was little support from the group for the use of this test as a mandatory pre-movement TB tests in tandem with the skin test.]

### **Action**

Send internal review paper to members when complete

Further work to be done by Defra on a cost benefit analysis.

## **Any other business:**

There was no other business.

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