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'There is no simple solution when it comes to TB' - Michael Seals

21 February 2015 | By [Alistair Driver](#)

MINISTERS would always retain control over the most controversial aspects of bovine TB (bTB) policy, even if the industry did get a greater say, according to one of the Government's leading animal health advisers.

Michael Seals, chairman of the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England (AHWBE), said he hoped firm proposals on a new governance model for bTB would be put out for consultation later this year.



Michael Seals

A 'range of options' were discussed during a workshop on TB governance and funding in autumn, he said.

"The workshop showed the industry's willingness to get involved in a partnership to get on top of this disease," he said.

However, a review of the structure of the TB Eradication Advisory Group (TBEAG) and the looming general election had put a brake on discussions.

But Mr Seals said: "Once we have restructured TBEAG, it will start to look at the options. I would hope later in the

year we would be able to put something out to the industry.”

Strategy

Defra's 25-year TB Eradication Strategy, published last year, said the Government would 'develop proposals for governance, delivery and funding in partnership with stakeholders'.

The scheme drew heavily on the experience of New Zealand, where 'TB programmes were either led by industry or delivered in partnership with government, with both parties contributing to the cost'.

More recently, NFU deputy president Minette Batters called for the establishment of a new independent body to drive bTB policy in England and 'de-politicise' the issue.

Mr Seals said the options under consideration would include the idea of a new standalone body but not too much should be read into the New Zealand model.



“For me it has always been about creating what I call the English solution; finding a structure which suits England in terms of our disease status and our needs on the ground, delivering services to farmers.”

It was also necessary to define areas which 'only Government could deliver', such as badger culling, he said.

“There is one thing for certain about this particular disease - you cannot avoid politics of one form or another and Ministers are in charge.”

Mr Seals acknowledged there were likely to be further cuts to Defra's budget, which could impact on the amount spent fighting TB as this accounted for a large part of Defra's expenses.

The financial burden on the industry was 'probably considerably more' than the £100 million cost to the taxpayer, he added.

With governance and funding for TB control the two biggest questions facing the industry, Mr Seals suggested discussions on these issues had not got far.

“We did consider a range of options in the workshop, none of which stood out, but they will be worked through and we will have alternatives for the consultation”

Mr Seals said AHWBE was 'looking at' improving the tabular valuation system for compensating farmers for TB outbreaks.

But he insisted there was no proposition to fundamentally change the way TB compensation was paid in England - such as by encouraging farmers to maximise the 'salvage value' of condemned animals on the open market, as had been suggested.

“Ministers are interested in improving the existing structure, although at some point in the future it is not impossible Government might want us to look at it again,” he said.

Compulsory levy

Another option was a compulsory industry levy although this, he said, would need approval from the Treasury in terms of its feasibility and discussions on this had not yet taken place.

He was more enthusiastic about farmers taking out insurance for consequential losses of a TB outbreak, such as lost milk sales which often outweighed the value of the animal. Developing such a market could significantly reduce the impact of breakdowns on businesses, he said.

Despite slow progress in some areas, Mr Seals insisted the strategy was being delivered 'on the ground' - with badger cull pilots, the development of a biosecurity plan and vaccination in the Edge Area all examples of Government working in partnership with the industry.

In addition, cattle measures would continue to be ramped up, with Defra set to consult on compulsory post-

movement testing in the Low Risk Area later this year, for example.

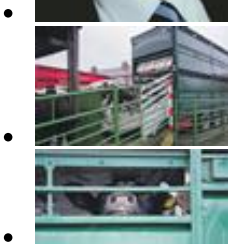
The future of the badger cull is likely to depend on the outcome of the May General Election.

"I cannot predict what will happen in the election, but AHWBE will give its view to the new Secretary of State as to what we believe should be the way forward," he said.

Mr Seals said he was also keen to see continued investment in scientific research to address the disease, such as improved TB testing.

"But the thing I have discovered is there no such thing as a simple solution when it comes to TB, even on the testing," he said.

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