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Bovine TB

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the Government's plans for tackling bovine TB in England. In doing so, I would like to thank the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs both for its comprehensive and thoughtful report and for allowing me additional time to respond to it, which I have now done. I am also grateful to Professor Bourne and the members of the Independent Scientific Group for their thorough scientific study.

Bovine TB is not a new problem. For more than 70 years, successive Governments have implemented cattle controls based on surveillance, testing and the slaughter of reactors. Those have been designed to protect public health, reduce the economic impact of the disease on farmers and, more recently, to comply with our obligations under European legislation. By the mid-1970s, the incidence of TB in cattle had reached an all-time low. However, since the 1980s, disease incidence has increased again—with a significant rise following the 2001 foot and mouth epidemic—and last year, nearly 3,200 new TB incidents were recorded and 18,543 reactor cattle were slaughtered in England.

Bovine TB is a serious problem, particularly in the south-west and the midlands. Although more than 90 per cent. of herds are TB free at any one time and some significant cattle farming areas are largely without the disease, I know from listening to farmers living with it just how difficult it is, and, for those most seriously affected, I know that the economic and human consequences are simply devastating. That is why we should take the right decisions to help.

Bovine TB is transmitted between cattle, and between cattle and badgers, but what has dominated the debate is whether badger culling could be effective in controlling the disease. The 10-year randomised badger culling trial overseen by the Independent Scientific Group on cattle TB, culled some 11,000 badgers to discover what impact it would have. The ISG's final report, published last year,

concluded that reactive culling—killing badgers in areas where there had been local TB breakdowns—made the problem worse; and that proactive culling, which involves taking an area of about 100 sq km and repeatedly culling badgers over a number of years, produced only marginal benefits because although TB was reduced in that area, it increased outside of it because of the disturbance and movement of badgers.

While scientists agree that a prolonged and effective cull over even larger areas—some 250 to 300 sq km—could reduce the incidence of bovine TB, the ISG's judgment was that the practicality and cost of delivering a cull on that scale meant that

“badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB”.

Having listened carefully to a wide range of views from scientists, farming, veterinary and wildlife organisations, and many others, and having considered all the evidence, I have decided that although such a cull might work, it might also not work. It could end up making the disease worse if the cull was not sustained over time or delivered effectively, and public opposition,

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including the unwillingness of some landowners to take part, would render that more difficult. It would not be right to take that risk. Therefore, in line with the advice that I have received from the Independent Scientific Group, our policy will be not to issue any licences to farmers to cull badgers for TB control, although we remain open to the possibility of revisiting that policy under exceptional circumstances, or if new scientific evidence were to become available.

This has been a difficult decision to take, and I know that farmers affected will be disappointed and angry. We all want the same thing—to beat this terrible disease—but I have had to reach a view about what will be effective in doing so, guided by the science and the practicality of delivering a cull. Having made a commitment to farmers and others that I would take a decision, now that it has been made, we need to put all our efforts into working together to take action that can work in all affected areas.

I have therefore also decided to make vaccination a priority, as recommended by the Select Committee. Effective vaccines could in future provide a viable way of tackling disease in both badgers and cattle. We have invested £18 million in the past 10 years in vaccine development, which has delivered good results, including: evidence that vaccinating young calves is effective; making progress towards developing a test to distinguish between infected and vaccinated cattle; showing that injectable BCG can protect badgers; and developing oral badger vaccine baits. I now intend to increase significantly our spending on vaccines by putting in £20 million over the next three years to strengthen our chances of successfully developing them. I will also provide additional funding to set up and run a practical project to prepare for deploying vaccines in future.

It could be some time before an oral vaccine for badgers, or a cattle vaccine, becomes available, so for now we must reduce the spread of the disease, and try to stop it becoming established in new areas. We have cattle controls in place to tackle TB, and have strengthened them in recent years with the introduction of pre-movement testing and the targeted use of the more sensitive gamma interferon test. But the action that individual farmers take, in particular to deal with the risk of importing disease into their herd, will also remain critical.

Disease control is not just a matter for Government, notwithstanding the considerable cost. Farmers have the main interest—the burden of controls falls most heavily on them—and they must be involved in working out how we go forward. It would be possible to tighten cattle measures still further as recommended by the ISG report, but that would come at a high cost. Whether it would be worthwhile is as much, if not more, a question for the industry as it is for Government. There is a choice to be made. That is why I have decided to set up a bovine TB partnership group with the industry to develop a joint plan for tackling bovine TB. We will discuss with the industry who should be on the group and how it should work, and I want to get started as quickly as possible.

The group will have full access to information on the TB budget and will be able to make recommendations about its use. It will be able to propose further practical steps to tackle the disease, including, for example, whether there should be tighter cattle controls. It will help to reach decisions about the injectable vaccines deployment

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project. It will be able to look at ways of helping farmers to manage the impact of living under disease restrictions, for example by providing incentives for biosecurity, or maximising the opportunities to market their cattle by looking again at the restrictions around red markets and encouraging the establishment of more exempt and approved finishing units. I am prepared to make additional funding available to support such initiatives if the group makes a strong case for doing so.

The House is united in its determination to overcome bovine TB, and much as we would all wish it, there is no quick or easy way of doing so. But our best chance is to work together, and I therefore hope that the industry will respond to my proposals so that we can get on with it.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for allowing us prior sight of it. I also congratulate the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on its report.

This is the Government's response to a consultation on badgers that began three years ago. Never have three years produced so little substance. Can the Secretary of State explain why he waited until the day after the royal show before making his statement, given that its contents were widely known during it? Was the reason that he did not wish to upset farmers before he attended?

Given that Lord Rooker has said that the EFRA Committee report was “absolutely first-class”, that the “buck stops here” and that

“the present situation is unsustainable”,

and given the widespread rumours of threatened resignation, can the Secretary of State assure us that his statement has the full support of his ministerial team in both Houses? Will he also confirm that since 1997 more than £600 million has been spent on combating the disease and 200,000 cattle have been slaughtered—for what benefit?

In that time, as the Secretary of State has said, the Government have produced just two initiatives, pre-movement testing and gamma interferon. Last year another 28,000 cattle were slaughtered, and perhaps the Secretary of State will confirm that according to figures for the period up to the end of April we are on course to slaughter 40,000 this year. There have been more than 1,400 new incidences this year, and nearly 5,500 herds were affected at the end of April. What would the Secretary of State say to a farmer to whom I spoke recently, who had just had a number of pedigree cattle taken? Yes, she had been compensated, but her complaint was about the waste of good cattle and taxpayers' money, and about the fact that we were getting nowhere.

The Secretary of State referred to the budget. Is he now able to answer the questions to which he has so far been unable to provide written parliamentary answers? How much is he planning to spend on TB in each of the three years of the current comprehensive spending review, and what is the projected number of cattle to be slaughtered in the setting of those budgets? If the number does rise

to 40,000 or more, how will he accommodate that—or will he cut compensation further? According to Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' 2004 paper

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"Preparing for a new GB strategy on bovine tuberculosis", the annual costs will rise to more than £300 million by 2012-13. Is that still the Secretary of State's estimate?

The Secretary of State obviously pins his hopes on vaccines—rightly, in some ways—but his predecessors have done the same. In 1998 the Government had a five-point plan, one of whose points was "developing a vaccine". In 2003, the right hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley) said

"The development of a TB vaccine is one of the key objectives of our TB research programme."—[*Official Report*, 1 April 2003; Vol. 402, c. 638W.]

In 2005, the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett) announced a 10-year framework, which stated

"We will actively continue with vaccine research looking at options for both badger and cattle vaccines."

Can the Secretary of State tell the House how many cattle he expects to be slaughtered annually by 2013, even if an oral vaccine is available then, and how much of England he expects to be infected? Is it not the case that, given a public service agreement to limit the spread of the disease to no more than 17 new parishes this year, the Government have effectively given up on any hope of control?

The Opposition have consistently called for a comprehensive package of measures to combat this disease. We do not believe that simply targeting badgers is the solution, but even Professor Bourne has said that the disease cannot be eradicated unless the wildlife reservoir is addressed. Let me therefore ask the Secretary of State some questions about the components of such a package.

Now that pre-movement testing has been in place for two years, is the Secretary of State satisfied that it is cost-effective, and that farmers are not moving stock without tests? While we welcome the extra resources for vaccine development, given his predecessors' commitments, how much more quickly does he expect it to produce results? What steps is he taking to examine other factors, such as the role of maize and possible trace element deficiencies in the spread of TB? Does he believe that the current frequency of testing is adequate, especially in areas that are adjacent to infected areas? Let me also ask him about the European context. Is it not the case that we are required to have a programme to eradicate TB? Has he discussed his statement with the European Commission to establish whether the Commission believes that his proposals have any hope of success?

The Secretary of State has set up yet another new study group. Have not the industry and most vets already told him what should be in the plan? What powers will the group have to do anything? He spoke of more money being available. Will he tell us how much, and where it will come from?

The right hon. Gentleman, as he said, has declined to control badgers and, in doing so, has gone against not only the demands of farmers but the recommendation of the Select Committee, the advice of Sir David King and even the evidence collected by the ISG. [*Interruption.*] It is true. Did not that evidence show clearly that removal of badgers in hot-spot areas caused a reduction in incidence and, most importantly, has not the continued monitoring of those areas since the final report now shown a reduction in incidence in excess of 50 per cent.? Would not the suggested area in north Devon have been

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an opportunity to run a selective removal programme, either using local knowledge—as the proponents suggest—or to validate the use of the PCR—polymerase chain reaction—test to establish whether setts contain infected animals? If it can be shown that removal was primarily of infected animals, would not that make it more acceptable and in the interests of badgers as well as cattle? I know that some of the right hon. Gentleman's advisers will say that the PCR test is not sufficiently accurate, so why is he content to slaughter thousands of cattle using a test with a sensitivity of only 80 per cent.?

Nobody wants to remove large numbers of badgers but the Secretary of State cannot deny that this is also a disease that affects them. Badgers with TB die a nasty, lingering death. They are evicted from their family setts and wander around the country spreading the disease. Surely it is in the interests of a healthy badger population, as well as a healthy cattle population, that we tackle the disease from all angles. It is clear from the statement today that the Government are not prepared to do so.

Some three weeks ago, the farming press carried a comment by me about the Secretary of State, in which I said that he is a nice man who has failed to deliver. I am grateful to him for proving my point.

Hilary Benn: First, I am happy to confirm that the statement represents the Government's policy on what we should do. The hon. Gentleman did not really respond to the question about badgers and the evidence. I disagree with his interpretation. In the end, it is no good taking a decision to allow something to happen that might not deliver the desired effect. The ISG report came as a great surprise to lots of people, as the hon. Gentleman will be only too well aware, and Professor Bourne made clear that what it found was counter-intuitive. But in the end the ISG's conclusion was, and I repeat it, that badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute. I have listened very carefully to that advice and have formed my judgment. I remain very clear in my view that it is the right decision to take.

Secondly, the budget will depend on the progress of the disease, so it is not possible to give a forecast of the spend. It will depend on what happens, and the same is true for any forecast about the number of cattle that might be slaughtered. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the figures for England over the last five or six years, he will see that the number has gone up and down during that time. Investment in vaccines will give us greater prospect that a usable vaccine will be found and, in the end, we need to focus our effort on something that will enable us to deal with the problem of bovine TB in all the areas where it is to be found. Even those who advocate selective culling would recognise that that is not a policy that would work everywhere. We have absolutely not given up on control, and the PCR test is not capable of being used in the way that the hon. Gentleman described it.

On the effectiveness of our current measures, these are precisely the questions that I want to put, but not to another "study group." The hon. Gentleman will be aware of how we have worked with the industry in tackling bluetongue, and that has been a successful partnership group. Why? Because we have sat down together, put the problems on the table, shared the responsibility and taken decisions accordingly. That is exactly the model that I wish to use now that I have taken a decision about badger culling.

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The hon. Gentleman asked about Europe. I am happy to tell the House that I spoke to the Commissioner earlier this afternoon.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and his response to the Select Committee report. Does he accept that bovine TB is the biggest challenge facing our livestock sector? Over the past five years up to last March, it has cost the Government well over £400 million, and in addition there is the huge commercial cost and the misery and suffering resulting from herd breakdown. Will the Secretary of State say a little more about not only cattle-to-cattle spread, but herd-to-herd spread?

Hilary Benn: I agree with my right hon. Friend about the impact of the disease and the effect it has on the farmers who are suffering as a result of it. We need to take all the measures that the evidence says will work and which are effective in dealing with the problem. That is why we have made changes in recent years, including bringing in the pre-movement testing which began for animals over 15 months of age in March 2006, and then extended to all cattle aged over 42 days. The straight answer is that it is probably still too early to tell exactly what the impact of that has been, which is why we must continue to monitor. It is important that we maintain the controls we have in place, and have an honest conversation with the industry about whether further cattle controls is the right step to take. I think it is right and proper to ask the industry what its view is precisely because of the impact on farmers, as opposed to me standing before the House today and saying that I have decided to impose those controls myself.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman for their kind words about the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's report. However, I must tell the Secretary of State that as a result of what he has said today there will be anger in the hot-spot areas and there will be fear in those areas where TB has yet to arrive. He said nothing in his statement about epidemiology. What steps will he take to address once and for all the question of how the disease is transmitted, for without that understanding there can be no effective biosecurity measures, and what specific proposals does he have to help farmers, particularly in the hot-spot areas, deal with biosecurity measures at a time when the livestock industry is under great financial pressure?

Hilary Benn: I know there will be anger—indeed, I referred to that in my statement—because I know how strongly lots of people on both sides of the argument feel about the issue. However, in the end I have to follow what the science says and make a judgment about the practicality and effectiveness of a course of action, and that is what I have done. The group that I will establish will look at precisely the question the right hon. Gentleman raised, including what further steps might be taken to support farmers in providing biosecurity and also including better evidence. I agree that it would be good to understand better the precise means of transmission, but all I can say to him on that is that, as his Committee's report set out very clearly, we still do not know quite a lot and it is important to continue with research to try to find the answers, but it is even more important that we make sure that effective controls are in place.

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