

# OPINION: Anthony Gibson discusses how paying the price may not bring control

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Be careful what you wish for, is the message that I would offer to any farmers who may be looking forward enthusiastically to sharing responsibility with Defra for setting and funding TB policy in England.

The proposal for an independent, farmer-led body, jointly funded by industry and government; was in Defra's 25-year TB strategy published last summer. It is based on a New Zealand model, which has indeed been hugely successful in reducing the spread of TB from the possum population, to the extent that total eradication of the disease is now in sight.

But this is not New Zealand. If agricultural productivity trumps sentimentality about diseased wild animals every time out there, precisely the reverse is true in England. In that context, I find it hard, verging on impossible, to imagine any Government, let alone an incoming Labour Government, ceding control of something as controversial as the badger cull to a semi-independent bunch of farmers and vets.

And even if they did decide that perhaps the poisoned chalice would be better off in farming hands, there are still the courts to contend with, and in terms of the type of badger cull we've been lumbered with, it's the courts, rather than the politicians, who have been calling the shots.

The danger is that any TB-free England type organisation would end up shouldering the responsibility for all of the financial and regulatory symptoms of the disease, the compensation rates, testing regimes, movement restrictions and so on, whilst having no control at all over one of the main causes of it.

Then there is the financial side of things to consider. In New Zealand, the farmers pay a levy of around £6 per head on cattle and 0.5p per kg on milk solids to fund their TB eradication body. I suspect that, in England, the figures would need to be higher, because we've got so many more TB cases, but in any case, it's a an academic argument, because the Government has apparently set its face against a compulsory levy.

Instead, what is being considered is a voluntary, or maybe semi-voluntary scheme, whereby a farmer who contributes towards the fund gets a better rate of compensation for a TB reactor than one who doesn't, with the condition that Defra matches whatever can be raised.

It all sounds horribly complicated, and probably unfair. I can't imagine many of the big cattle dealers putting their hands in their pockets if they don't have to. Nor can I see farmers in the largely TB-free North and East falling over themselves to contribute. The burden of funding disease control will thus fall on the same shoulders which are already bearing the costs of the disease itself.

Of course, if the new TB-control body not only funded the next crop of badger culls, but also gave farmers in the cull areas the freedom to get on and do the job in the most cost-effective way, then any levy, voluntary or otherwise, would be a price well worth paying. The NFU certainly cannot afford to continue indefinitely under-writing the cost of culls to the extent that it has in Somerset and Gloucestershire, as outgoing president, Peter Kendall, has been making very clear.

I am sure that the principle of shared responsibility for animal disease policy is the right one. It is the practice which worries me. If paying the piper really did allow farmers and vets to call the tune, then it would certainly be a price well worth paying. But can you honestly see that happening? No, me neither.