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Badger cull U-turn: precious time has been wasted on this foolish policy

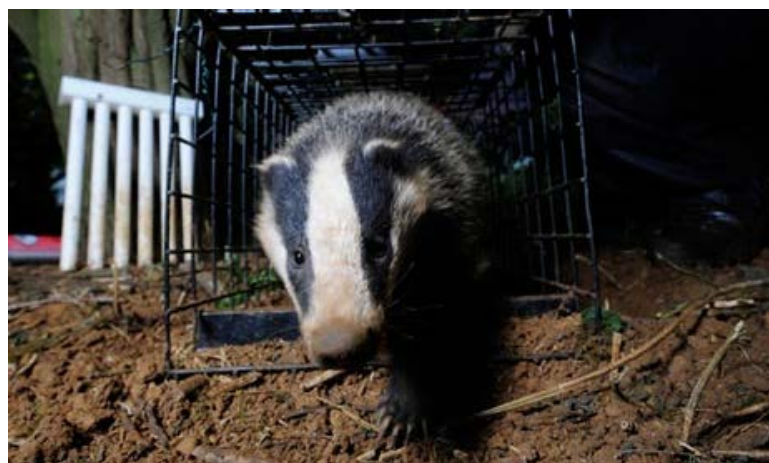
Scientists were right to call it a costly distraction – to combat bovine TB the focus must be on vaccination and biosecurity



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'The coalition cancelled five of the six badger vaccine trials, throwing its weight behind the cull.' Photograph: Adrian Sherratt

Politicians are sometimes driven to flout public opinion and sometimes to flout scientific opinion. But flouting both simultaneously is for the foolhardy alone. Such folly has led to the [delay, and quite possibly abandonment, of the controversial cull of badgers](#) in England – despite Owen Patterson, the environment secretary, declaring that the policy is intact and will go ahead next year.

The plan had two simple aims: curb rising tuberculosis infections in cattle and cut the cost to taxpayers of dealing with TB, £90m in 2011 and rising too. Yet the failure of the proposed cull to do either was obvious from the start. No scientific expert I have found outside the government payroll backed the cull. Worse, they derided it in extraordinarily outspoken terms.

Lord John Krebs, a careful and eminent scientist who designed a landmark 10-year trial of badger culling, [called the cull "mindless"](#). The vet who ran the trial, Prof John Bourne, said it could make TB "a damn sight worse." And with deadly understatement, the government's chief scientist, Sir John Beddington, would say no more than: "I am content that the evidence base, including uncertainties and evidence gaps, has been communicated effectively to ministers."

On costs, the initial government impact assessment showed the culls would cost more than they would save, and another veteran of the landmark trial, Prof John McInerney, called it a ["bad deal for taxpayers"](#). Matters worsened when on-the-ground surveys, costing almost £1m,

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discovered up to **twice as many badgers** in the first cull areas in Gloucestershire and Somerset. As the shooters were to be paid a bounty per dead badger, that meant costs and logistical problems were soaring.

The British public's great love of animals was also a big factor. More than 150,000 people signed a government e-petition begun by Brian May, leading to a six-hour **debate in the House of Commons** due this Thursday: the first time MPs could vote on the issue. And despite the government seeing off an earlier high court challenge, a **renewed legal assault** over issues including public safety around the unmarked killing zones promised more pain for ministers.

This assault from all sides caused panic and chaos inside the environment department, with Paterson holding daily morning crisis meetings. The farmers, led by Peter Kendall, the NFU president, got cold feet last week, but were bounced into hanging in there by Paterson and Downing Street, the latter terrified of another U-turn in the week that saw David Cameron flounder on an energy bill pledge and his chief whip, Andrew Mitchell, resign. But the pressure was unbearable, and finally broke today.

The badgers have a reprieve, but the problem of TB in cattle, which saw 26,000 slaughtered in 2011 at a cost to taxpayers of £90m, remains unchanged. Farmers continue to suffer the financial and emotional trauma of losing their herds. A **belated crackdown on the TB testing and cattle movement regime** comes into force from January and will make a difference, given **England's poor record**. Bourne says only better biosecurity from farmers can ultimately solve the TB problem. But telling farmers they are bad at their job is a tough message at any time.

Vaccination research will continue, both for badgers and cattle, but precious time has been lost. The coalition cancelled five of the six badger vaccine trials, throwing its weight behind the cull.

The 32 eminent scientists who wrote to the Observer calling for the cull to be abandoned called it a "**costly distraction**". They were right. Stubborn ministers, who became so close to the NFU that their communications have been designated as "internal government communication", were wrong. Farmers, cattle, taxpayers and anyone who values science-led policy are worse off as a result.

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