

Farming: Bovine TB is tough bug to crack, says Government chief vet Nigel Gibbens

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AFTER a special briefing to rural reporters, it is clear what the Government's chief vet sees as the biggest enemy in the battle to give England official TB-free status in the next 25 years.

Mycobacterium bovis – bovine TB – is "a tough bug" says Nigel Gibbens.

Getting as near as possible to eradication means bearing down on the disease rather than, specifically, on badgers the culling of which – he insisted – was only a small part of the overall strategy.

But without a cull, he was equally adamant, there will be no chance of reaching TB-free status by 2038 – the deadline set by former Defra minister Owen Paterson.

Mr Gibbens, who was updating journalists on the Government's TB policy, says he does not underestimate the task, even over that sort of timescale.

He said that, unlike the cattle disease rinderpest, eradicated in 2001, and the human smallpox virus, last diagnosed in 1977, the bovine TB bacteria did not respond to a single "magic bullet".

He said it could survive in the environment for a very long time, affected many species – including humans – and was difficult to treat and diagnose.

"We need a range of measures to stop the spread of the disease," he said. "Over the long term we want to rid the South West of the disease in cattle and in badgers."

To underline the scale of the problem he laid out how fast it had spread. From almost eradicating the disease in the late 1970s – before the Badger Act – to 2010, bovine TB cases have increased nine-fold.

He added: "Right now we think we are seeing a steadying of the disease but we have to be very careful of over-interpreting the statistics."

He stressed that neither the pilot culls last year, nor the badger vaccination programme in Wales, could be credited for that since neither had been in place for long enough.

Cattle controls, however, had made a difference. But the chief vet accepted they were a burden on farmers and were costly to both them and to taxpayers.

He also agreed that they were having an impact on the livestock sector, discouraging some farmers in disease hotspot areas, like the South West, from breeding pedigree animals because the risk of losing them to bovine TB was too great.

He said Defra, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, wanted to make it compulsory for farmers to give the TB history of a herd when they were selling animals. "At the moment, it is a case of 'buyer beware'," he said.

Mr Gibbens was anxious to stress that TB had to be fought alongside the operation of a normal livestock industry, in as far as that was possible.

"If we went for whole herd slaughter we would be free of the disease but would have no cattle industry," he said.

"We've got to maintain a livestock and a cattle industry in this country; it is crucial to farming and, in certain areas, it is crucial to the whole rural economy."