

# Policy statement

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## **BADGERS AND BOVINE TB**

The badger, commonly found in many outer suburbs of London, can be described as one of Britain's best loved and iconic mammals. However, they have become central to a controversial political and scientific debate surrounding the presence and spread of bovine tuberculosis (TB) in cattle. This is leading to calls for culls and eradication of badger populations from areas where bovine TB is present, despite conflicting evidence as to whether this would work. Government is determined to make progress in the eradication of bovine TB, and the Welsh Assembly has approved a limited cull. In England, Defra has opted to trap and vaccinate badgers in areas with a high incidence of TB.

### **I. Policy**

- London Wildlife Trust does not support a cull of badgers as a means to control and eradicate bovine TB. We believe that recent scientific findings suggest that badger culling over large areas is not only impractical but will result in potential and significant negative effects.
- Whilst bovine TB is currently not present in cattle in and around London, and no culls of badger are currently proposed here, we believe that culling of badger provides justification for further illegal persecution and killing of badgers in London.
- London Wildlife Trust will only support the killing of wild animals where this is a 'last resort' measure and our own guidelines are followed. These are set out in The Wildlife Trusts' guidelines on Killing Wild Animals, 1998.
- London Wildlife Trust accepts that bovine TB in cattle is a significant problem for farming in the UK and that urgent action is needed to combat the disease. We particularly recognise the important role that the livestock industry can play in the environmentally sensitive management of the countryside, and the serious disruption and anxiety caused to farmers experiencing a TB herd breakdown.
- We welcome the Government taking action to address bovine TB and believe that this should be based on clear scientific evidence and well reasoned arguments. We believe that The Wildlife Trusts' response to the disease should follow the co-ordinated approach set out in the Government's Strategic Framework for the sustainable control of bovine TB in Great Britain.

More long term investment to tackle the disease is required to develop an effective vaccine for cattle and if new scientific evidence were to be produced, London Wildlife Trust would review its current position.

## 2. Badgers and bovine TB

London Wildlife Trust supports the Wildlife Trusts' position statement on badgers and bovine TB. This states that:

- The Wildlife Trusts accept that bovine TB is in the badger population, and that badgers along with other native mammals may act as a reservoir for the disease and a source of bovine TB infection in cattle.
- The Wildlife Trusts believe that there is currently no scientific evidence to support the view that badgers are the main source of transmission of bovine TB to cattle (the main source being cattle-to-cattle) or that localised culling of badgers is an effective way of preventing the transmission of bovine TB from a wildlife reservoir to cattle.
- The Wildlife Trusts believe that the current Defra proposals for badger culling are not supported by science. We believe they are impractical, publicly unacceptable, unsustainable and are not cost effective:
  - We support the scientific findings of the Randomised Badger Culling Trials that localised or limited culling of badgers leads to an increase in the incidence of bovine TB in surrounding areas.
  - We also support the recent scientific findings that suggest that badger culling over large enough areas to be theoretically effective (i.e. over 300 km<sup>2</sup>) will not only be impractical but will still result in potential negative edge effects through perturbation. This will be exacerbated because of the difficulty of removing all badgers as a result of noncompliance of landowners, badgers' ability to avoid traps and snares, and the potential use of a closed season when females are lactating. Because there is no scientific case to support the Defra proposals for badger culling, The Wildlife Trusts will not currently support badger culling on our reserves.
  - We believe that culling of badgers over large areas represents localised eradication of the species and would require the use of snares. We believe that localised eradication of badgers is publicly unacceptable on moral and conservation grounds and could be in contravention of the Bern Convention.
  - We believe the current Defra proposals do not include measures to assess the effectiveness of badger culling alongside the impact of pre-movement testing of cattle, or clarify how a localised eradication programme would operate in the long term. The proposals therefore do not allow for an exit strategy on badger culling and are unsustainable.
  - Furthermore, we believe that even if such a culling strategy were practical, publicly acceptable, or sustainable it would not be cost effective.
- The Wildlife Trusts believe that because there is currently no clear scientific justification for badger culling, the Government's main control strategy should be focused on cattle-to-cattle transmission. At the same time as controlling the spread of the disease between cattle, a secondary strategy to reduce potential re-infection from wildlife populations should be progressed. This strategy should focus on strengthening current research into the nature of the disease in badgers in order to achieve a healthy and stable badger population and specifically looking at demographic trends behind the perturbation effect and the development of an effective vaccine for badgers.
- The Wildlife Trusts will review its position on control.

London Wildlife Trust supports the Wildlife Trusts' position statement on bovine TB control in cattle. This states:

- The Wildlife Trusts believe that cattle-to-cattle transmission is the most significant route of infection for bovine TB and that Government action should focus on addressing this as a matter of urgency.

- The Wildlife Trusts believe that priority action to reduce the incidence of the disease should therefore involve improvements in cattle testing (including use of the gamma interferon test) and stricter movement restrictions (including pre and post-movement testing). We believe that testing should apply immediately to movements of all animals over six weeks old.
- The Wildlife Trusts also believe that anything farmers can do to improve herd health, lower stocking densities if they are too high, and improve biosecurity on the farm should be encouraged.
- The Wildlife Trusts believe that to tackle the disease in the long term more investment is needed to develop an effective vaccine for cattle, to be used alongside the above measures.

### 3. Context

Agricultural interests, the nature conservation sector, scientists, animal welfare groups and Government have become entangled in an on-going debate about controlling bovine tuberculosis (*Mycobacterium bovis*). At present in some parts of England there is a relatively high incidence of bovine tuberculosis (bovine TB) in cattle. Bovine TB in cattle is a significant problem for farmers in the UK; farmers and vets are keen to eradicate it and they believe that one of the main reasons for its continued presence of is that badgers are carriers and therefore pass it onto cattle. They believe that one way to help control and eradicate bovine TB is to cull badgers in the areas of the country where bovine TB is prevalent.

All cattle are tested every one to four years depending on the locality of the farm. Badgers were first linked to cattle in 1971 when the bacterium was found in a badger carcass. In response to this, badger culling was undertaken in locations where the disease occurred, though in the last 30 years the culling strategies have changed several times.

It has been suggested that in areas where there are large groups of badgers and a high incidence of bovine TB, that badgers are culled. This would be a large enough area to cause localised extinction in the badger population. It is thought that this would prevent the spread of bovine TB in cattle and ensure that farmers lose fewer cattle to the disease. However, previous culling research showed that when badgers are culled within an area, those badgers that are on the periphery of the culling are socially disturbed by the culling and this results in movement of the badgers on the edge of the area which is known as the perturbation effect. In this research it was clearly shown that where badger culling took place, there was actually an increase in the levels of bovine TB in cattle, not a decrease as was hoped.

This will be exacerbated because of the difficulty of removing all badgers from a bovine TB hot spot, because they have the ability to avoid traps and snares, and the potential use of a closed season when females are lactating. There will also likely to be significant non-cooperation of landowners to a badger culling policy, which will mean the complete extinction of badgers in an area is not possible so the perturbation effect will apply.

In July 2008 the Environment Secretary Hilary Benn rejected a badger cull as a solution to combating bovine TB in cattle.

### 4. FAQs

#### ***Is there a chance of bovine TB being found in or near London?***

- Most of the current cattle herds where bovine TB is present are found in the south west of England and southern Wales, and this is where Government action is focusing preventative action. There have been records in some herds in neighbouring counties to London (Essex, Buckinghamshire and Kent), but these are all at least 50km distant from the Greater London boundary. There are a few cattle herds in London, mainly

reared for beef, but also used for conservation management. Badgers are present in many areas of London, with some especially large populations in some outer suburbs. There will always be the potential for bovine TB to infect cattle in London, but at present the risks are lower.

### **Can people catch bovine TB?**

- Humans can be infected with bovine TB, which is closely related to human TB (*M. tuberculosis*). In humans, both bovine and human TB both affect the lungs and if left untreated may spread to other organs of the body and cause death. In the past, most people became infected with bovine TB through drinking unpasteurised milk from infected cows. With widespread pasteurisation of milk, the incidence of bovine TB in humans has dropped to a low level. The risk, though small, is present. In 1995, 32 (1%) of the 3,200 tuberculosis isolates cultured in the UK were attributed to bovine TB.

### **5. Links**

Bovine TB: Independent Scientific Group final report- <http://www.wildlifeextra.com/go/news/badger-report.html#cr>

Wildlife Trusts: <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/index.php?section=environment:agriculture:campaigns>

Natural England: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/regulation/wildlife/badger-tb.aspx>

The Badger Trust <http://www.badger.org.uk/Content/Home.asp>