

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, badgers have been subject to persecution, and in and around London their habitats have been eroded through development pressure. As such protective legislation and planning policy aims to reduce these impacts. Nevertheless, foraging badgers are highly vulnerable to road collisions, and have come into conflict with garden owners in their search for food.

More recently badgers have become central to a controversial political and scientific debate surrounding the presence and spread of bovine tuberculosis (TB) in cattle. Calls for eradication of badger populations from areas where bovine TB is present, led eventually to the Government introducing controlled culls in parts of western England and Wales in 2013, which were extended in 2015 and 2016.

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 will result in potential and significant negative effects and is also disproportionately costly and impractical; we support The Wildlife Trusts' call for the cull to be abandoned.
- The Trust recognises that the badger/cattle relationship is complex in the transmission of bovine TB, that other wild and domestic mammals are also vectors of the disease, and that other environmental factors play a role. The evidence suggests that culling of badgers where the disease is prevalent is not the most effective or efficient means to curtail it.
- 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 and around London.
- The 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.
- The Trust accepts that bovine TB in cattle is a significant problem for farming in Britain 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.
- Whilst we welcome the Government taking action to address bovine TB we believe that this should be based on clear scientific evidence and a robust rationale. 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.

- We support the vaccination of badgers being carried out by the Wildlife Trusts.

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 will 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 mammals¹ 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 km²) 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

¹ e.g. deer

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*, bovine TB). At present in some parts of western England and Wales there is a relatively high incidence of bovine TB (bTB) in cattle. Bovine TB in cattle is a significant problem for farmers in parts of Britain; 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 bTB is to cull badgers in the areas of the country where bTB is prevalent.

All cattle are tested every one to four years depending on the locality of the farm. Badgers were first linked to bTB in 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 35 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 bTB, 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 bTB 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 bTB in cattle, not a decrease as was hoped.

This will be exacerbated because of the difficulty of removing all badgers from a bTB 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.

Controls and culls

There has been one study commissioned by the Government into the issue of bTB transmission from badgers to cattle; the Randomised Badger Culling Trials (RBCT) between 1998 and 2006. Its final report stated that “*data indicates that badger culling can make no meaningful contribution to cattle TB control in Britain*” (Bourne, 2007).

In July 2008, following the RBCT, the then Secretary of State for the Environment rejected a badger cull as a solution to combating bTB in cattle. However, in December 2011 the then Government announced the start of two trial areas to carry out controlled culling in 2012, in a move described as “*transmuting evidence-based policy to policy-based evidence.*” Despite an attempt by the Badger Trust to legally prevent this, the cull began in west Gloucestershire and west Somerset in 2013. Again, against a prominent opposition campaign, the culling areas were extended into Dorset in 2015, and in August 2016 into three areas in Cornwall, Devon and Herefordshire.

The cost of culls have been significant; up to 2014 £16.8 million had been spent culling 2,476 badgers (£6,800 per badger); Defra have not released later cull costs. Over 80% of the culled badgers have been recorded as TB free. A Defra appointed Independent Expert Panel, which had been convened to assess the first culls and describing them as “*ineffective and inhumane*”, was dissolved in 2014.

Towards vaccination?

In west Wales, the Welsh Government started a badger vaccination project in 2011 as part of its bTB eradication programme; 5,000 badgers were vaccinated over four years at the cost of two weeks of the English culling programme. Incidence of bTB in Wales fell by 28%. In June 2017, with 95% of Welsh cattle herds TB free, the Welsh Government continued to rule out large scale badger culling.

In 2010 Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (GWT) paid for the deployment of a new bTB badger vaccine, making it the first organisation to do this. This work, funded by GWT’s members, began in 2011 by trained Trust staff on a set of nature reserves where the badger vaccination could be used practically, to the benefit of the Trust’s, and its neighbour’s, cattle. GWT has led The Wildlife Trusts on bTB, which has led to another 13 Wildlife Trusts embarking on vaccination programmes. The Wildlife Trusts’ vaccination programmes have cost just under £300 per badger.

At the time of the fourth year of the cull, “*much of the evidence used in the rationale for the [cull] is unclear*” (The Wildlife Trusts, 2017). It appears there has been little rigour over cattle-testing, movement of cattle controls, biosecurity on farms. The Wildlife Trusts have called for the following measures to be progressed to counteract the risk posed to cattle by bTB:

1. Accelerate research into cattle vaccination (the best means for long-term reduction in bTB) and improve testing regimes for cattle;
2. Reduce cow-to-cow infection by tightening cattle movement controls;
3. Raises standards of biosecurity on farms (e.g. to exclude badger, deer) perhaps linked to cross-compliance for subsidy payments;
4. Secure alternative sources of badger vaccine (there is a global shortage of BCG).

4. References

Bourne, J. B. (Chair) (2007), *Bovine TB: The Scientific Evidence; A Science Base for a Sustainable Policy to Control TB in Cattle*, Final Report of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB, presented to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, June 2007.

The Wildlife Trusts (2017), *Bovine TB: Supplementary badger disease control*, submission to Defra consultation, January 2017.

5. Links

Defra: *The Government's policy on Bovine TB and badger control in England* (2011)

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13691-bovinetb-policy-statement.pdf>

Government *Strategic Framework for the sustainable control of bovine tuberculosis (bTb) in Great Britain* (2005)

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/diseases/atoz/tb/strategy/newstrategy.htm>

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

The Wildlife Trusts: <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/badgers-and-bovineTB>

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

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

6. 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 is focusing preventative action and culls of badgers. 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 Britain were attributed to bovine TB.