Briefing document

Plaid Cymru debate: Bovine TB

Date of debate: February 28 2024

RSPCA Cymru welcomes the opportunity to brief Members of the Senedd ahead of Plaid Cymru's Senedd debate on Bovine TB. While the RSPCA understands - and agrees - that dealing with Bovine TB (bTB) can have a significant impact on farmers' mental health and wellbeing, we remain opposed to badger culling as a solution. The RSPCA has long-standing concerns around badger culling for both scientific and welfare reasons.

There is **no** scientific consensus that the culling of badgers is effective in dealing with bTB. While badgers are a protected species that are considered among our most iconic and popular wildlife, some continue to believe badgers play a large role in the spread of TB. However, the science shows this is wrong as it is estimated that as much as 94% of bTB is transmitted from cattle-cattle[1]. RSPCA Cymru is therefore calling for a focus on cattle-based methods that offer more effective, longer-term solutions towards dealing with bTB.

While the data relevant to bTB is extremely variable and tends to fluctuate, recent reductions in both herd prevalence and the number of cattle slaughtered for bTB purposes in England has led to a renewed focus on the differences between Wales' and England's approaches towards the disease. Data from August 2023 shows that herd bTB prevalence is currently 1.2% lower in England than in Wales, with this being the largest variation between the two counties in recent years - despite the fact that England has been culling badgers for more than a decade. For context, there was just a 0.4% difference between the two countries in August 2022 and a 0.5% difference the August before[2].

Differences between Wales and England

Wales has focused on badger vaccination and restricting cattle movements while targeting hotspot farms as opposed to badger culling. According to the latest data from the Welsh Government, 94.7% of Wales' herds are TB free, a reduction on the previous year[3]. England has culled over 210,000 badgers over the past eleven years[4], costing approximately £70 million a year[5]. However, the badger cull has not produced a meaningful reduction in bTB herd incidence or prevalence levels in England[6].

While we know that England's badger cull costs millions every year, there is no reliable data as to how much is allocated for badger vaccination, which has been shown to reduce the severity and progression of bTB in badgers. Evidence from the Welsh Intensive Action Area (IAA) shows that vaccinating badgers,

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[1] https://www.badgertrust.org.uk/post/94-of-welsh-herds-are-btb-free-without-culling-badgers
[2] http://3.9.48.73/bTB/
[3] https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2023-12/bovine-tb-dashboard-quarter-3-2023.pdf
[4] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-66091279
[5] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5beed433e5274a2af111f622/tb-review-final-report-corrected.pdf
[6] https://bvajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/vetr.1384

rather than culling, along with stricter cattle control measures, contributed to a 35% reduction in bTB incidence in cattle breakdowns in the area between 2010-2017.

Herd incidence, where new cases of bTB are found in officially TB-free (OFT) herds during the twelve month period in question, is still largely similar in both countries. In England it currently stands at 7.1, while in Wales it is 7. However, this paints an entirely different picture to the previous 12 months when Wales was performing significantly better, when herd incidence was 2.6 points lower than England. A longer-term look at the relevant data shows that new bTB incidents fell by 49% in Welsh herds while prevalence decreased by 32% between 2009 and 2022. All of this has been achieved without the widespread culling of badgers[7].

While the recent improvements made by England with respect to its approach to bTB - particularly around restricting cattle movements[8] - are undoubtedly positive, the disease remains persistent in the country and there are no robust data to show that these latest 'gains' are as a result of badger culling[5]. The UK Government has previously expressed its intention to move away from badger culling in the coming years, to focus on vaccination programmes, cattle movement and biosecurity measures. However, with badgers still being culled, three-quarters of England's entire badger population could be lost before alternative, more humane measures are prioritised[9].

While there are no definitive data that shows how many badgers are infected with bTB as England has not been routinely testing culled badgers for the disease, evidence suggests that a vast majority of those who have been culled to date have been bTB free. For example, of the 994 carcasses of culled badgers tested in 2016 in Cumbria, only 4 percent were shown to have any signs of infection[10]. Similarly, the latest data from Wales shows only 9% of badgers removed from chronically infected farms were found to have bTB on post-mortem[11]. As all mammals have the potential to carry TB, establishing the origins of the disease by species and which species is spreading the disease to the other is extremely difficult. As badgers are among the carriers of TB, there is also the risk that culling them could actually worsen the problems associated with bTB. Badger behaviour may start to change during a cull, as infected animals could move to areas next to cull zones[12] with this known as the perturbation effect[13].

Recommendations

The RSPCA wishes to see a humane, sustainable solution to bTB. While the evidence relevant to bTB is hotly contested, there is a general consensus that two of the most important steps to reducing bTB do not involve culling badgers: the development of a more sensitive test for identifying cattle that have bTB and a cattle vaccination programme. As the scientific evidence around the effectiveness of culling wildlife for bTB purposes is inconclusive at best, the RSPCA has consistently called for a focus on more humane preventative measures. These include improvements in cattle biosecurity measures, vaccination in badgers and, eventually, cattle vaccination. The science tells us that transmission of the disease between cattle is a far more significant risk than badger to cattle transmission and that there is an undetected reservoir of the disease in cattle that the current testing regime is not – and is not capable of – picking up.

It is important that any changes in the Welsh Government's approach to dealing with bTB are evidence-based and use scientific data as opposed to being based on one set of statistics and perceptions. RSPCA Cymru therefore strongly recommends that all Members of the Senedd vote against any measures which endorse the culling of badgers in Wales.

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[7] https://www.gov.wales/plan-published-build-steady-progress-eradicate-tb
[8] http://apha.defra.gov.uk/documents/ov/Briefing-Note-1523.pdf
[9] https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/mammals/badger-cull-working
[10] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/787588
[11] https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/bovine-tb-badger-trapping-and-testing-on-chronic-tb-breakdown-farms
[12] https://www.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494939/7712578/Bovine+TB%3A+not+everything+is+black+and+white+%28PDF
[13] https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1365-2664.13512