

Position Statement

Bovine tuberculosis in cattle and badgers

August 2014



WOODLAND
TRUST



WOODLAND
TRUST

Position Statement

Bovine tuberculosis in cattle and badgers

The Trust's view:

- The Trust is sympathetic to the impact that bovine tuberculosis (bTB) has on farmers and cattle, and recognises its cost to the taxpayer and the need for an effective solution.
- While badgers have been shown to carry bTB, the Trust does not support culling as a means of eradicating or controlling bovine TB. This view is based on the evidence of the most comprehensive scientific study carried out to date
- Badgers are a keystone woodland species and one of the few top omnivores left in the UK. The impact their removal would have on ecosystems is unknown, but could be detrimental. The Trust is concerned that badger culling could lead to contravention of Article 9 of the [Bern Convention](#).
- The Trust believes more resources should be committed to developing effective badger and cattle bTB vaccinations, and accurate bTB tests, and improving cattle-based disease control methods and biosecurity on farms and at markets.

The Trust will:

- Continue to support badger vaccination trials.
- Refuse access to Woodland Trust sites for the purpose of culling badgers, unless required by law.
- Work with partner organisations to oppose badger culling, in favour of badger and cattle vaccinations, improved testing, best practice in livestock farming and increased biosecurity to keep badgers and cattle apart.
- Continue to monitor the evidence and scientific research on bTB, cattle and badgers.

Bovine Tuberculosis in cattle and badgers

Bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is a problem for UK cattle herds that will cost an estimated £1 billion over the next decade. It is an infectious respiratory disease that requires slaughter of cattle testing positive for bTB. Between the 1930s and 1960 there was a bTB epidemic in cattle in the UK, with 80 per cent of livestock infected. This was brought under control through cattle based controls alone, and bTB virtually eliminated, but it has since increased again. The worst hit areas are the Midlands and south west England, and areas of west Wales.

Cattle to cattle transmission is via water droplets from breathing. Contaminated feed and water can also spread infection, but are less of a risk. Modern intensive farming methods are thought to encourage bTB spread, as greater numbers of cattle are kept in close confinement, such as over-wintering for long periods in poorly ventilated barns. Another pathway is transmission between herds at shows and markets.

Badgers are thought to be a transmission vector, but cattle to cattle transmission is the main cause of spread to new areas. The incidence of bTB in both cattle and badgers in the UK increased sharply following the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001, as bTB testing was suspended and infected cattle may have been moved around the country to restock areas.

The Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RBCT), also known as the Krebs Trial, took place between 1998 and 2007; through scientific testing it aimed to establish whether or not culling badgers is an effective and sustainable method for bTB control and was the most rigorous piece of scientific research on this issue to date. The [final conclusion](#) was: “After careful consideration of all the RBCT and other data presented in this report, including an economic assessment, we conclude that badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB in Britain”. Culling would need to be sustained and comprehensive over long periods, across large areas with hard boundaries, to contribute, and the group conclude this would not be cost effective even if feasible.

England – The Government is developing a strategy to achieve Officially Bovine-Tuberculosis Free (OTF) status for England by 2025. This includes two proposed pilot badger culls in west Gloucestershire and west Somerset, though these will use different methods from the Krebs trials so the likely effect is not tested. .

Wales – In 2012 the Welsh Assembly Government's five year badger vaccination project began in the Intensive Action Area in west Wales. In the first year 1424 badgers were successfully vaccinated. Following a lack of public support, the Welsh government scrapped plans for a cull in favour of vaccination and results are being monitored.

Northern Ireland – Through enhancement of cattle-based measures alone, there has been a significant reduction in bTB prevalence. Research is being conducted into an eradication programme that would combine vaccination with the selected culling of only those badgers showing signs of bTB infection.

Scotland – Incidence of bTB has historically been very low and there is no evidence of a bTB reservoir in wildlife. Under EU rules, Scotland has had OTF status since 2009.

The Woodland Trust's view

The Trust bases its view on the best available scientific evidence, which we believe does not currently support the culling of badgers as an effective way of controlling bovine TB. There is also inadequate understanding of the impact of large-scale culling of a keystone woodland mammal on woodland ecosystems. We strongly support increased funding for, research into and trials of alternative methods to reduce bTB incidence in the UK. Key to this coordinated response are effective badger and cattle bTB vaccinations, accurate bTB tests, improving cattle-based disease control methods and biosecurity on farms and at markets, and best practice in livestock farming.