



House of Commons  
Environment, Food and Rural  
Affairs Committee

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# **Badgers and Bovine TB: Government Reply to the Committee's Report**

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**Eighth Special Report**

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### Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 3262; the Committee's e-mail address is: [efracom@parliament.uk](mailto:efracom@parliament.uk).

# EIGHTH SPECIAL REPORT

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reported to the House on *Badgers and Bovine TB* in its Seventh Report of Session 2002–03, published on 9 April 2003 as HC 432. The Government's Reply to the Report was received on 11 June 2003.

## Government response

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### Introduction

The Government welcomes this report. Following the report of the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, the reports of the inquiries into the FMD epidemic, and the publication of the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food in England, the Government is now developing an Animal Health and Welfare Strategy. This will set the framework for a new bovine tuberculosis (TB) Strategy. The Committee's report will be extremely helpful in taking that process forward.

The Committee has rightly identified the need for the Industry to be more involved in the control of TB, especially in relation to improvements of husbandry practice.

The Animal Health and Welfare Strategy will seek more stakeholder engagement in the protection of animal health and the need to improve disease prevention measures on farm, including measures against bovine TB. The Government will consult in the summer on a draft Biosecurity Action Plan to address this need.

This response has been agreed with the devolved administrations and incorporates the views of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG).

Where appropriate, related recommendations have been considered together.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

**Recommendation 1: We welcome the fact that controls on the movement of livestock have been tightened in high risk areas. Nevertheless, we are surprised that stricter controls were not imposed sooner (paragraph 9).**

As explained to the Committee, Government considered that a decision to place herds under movement restrictions with little immediate prospect of being able to organise a test could be open to legal challenge on grounds of proportionality.

In light of this, two risk based measures to minimise the spread of TB through movements of infected cattle were announced in January 2002:

- With effect from 31 January 2002 immediate movement restrictions on annual testing herds that had missed a 6 or 12 month check test, pending a satisfactory test;
- In conjunction with this, we provided guidance to Divisional Veterinary Managers (DVMs) and Local Veterinary Inspectors (LVIs) on the prioritisation of overdue TB tests, based on the likelihood of finding reactors in each type of test;

As part of the 'Autumn package', further measures were announced:

- With effect from 1 February 2003: movement restrictions in herds that are overdue their TB test by more than 12 months.
- With effect from 1 April 2003: movement restrictions in herds that are overdue their TB test by more than 6 months

Most recently, on 27 March 2003, Government announced that, with effect from 30 September 2003, all herds with an overdue TB test of three months or more will be subject to movement restrictions.

### **Recommendation 2, 3 & 8**

**Recommendation 2:** We understand why the Government wants to implement its Animal Health and Welfare Strategy as soon as possible. However, we recommend that Defra take time to assess what might be learnt from past responses to animal disease outbreaks, including bovine tuberculosis. Such an assessment would reveal the best ways for Defra to get its message across to farmers, and so help in the delivery of the Strategy. It might also suggest ways in which advice specifically relating to bovine tuberculosis should be improved (paragraph 14).

**Recommendation 3:** The average cost of a TB breakdown is £36,000. We are therefore surprised that farmers have not more urgently sought Government help in testing better husbandry methods, in line with the Krebs report. We urge the farming industry to come forward with proposals for improved husbandry methods. If it does so, we recommend that the Government provide suitable financial support to help with their implementation (paragraph 15).

**Recommendation 8:** Although no single measure will obviate the risk of a TB breakdown, investment in husbandry and biosecurity measures will clearly help. We are therefore concerned about limited progress in respect of improved husbandry. We have suggested ( in paragraph 15) how farmers and the Government should take responsibility for the issue. In addition, communication by the Government and others of recommendations for better husbandry must be improved (paragraph 21).

The Animal Health and Welfare Strategy will take time to evolve and the Government plans to publish an outline document this summer which sets out the guiding principles

and key messages. It will recognise that effective communication of advice to farmers on the protection of their livestock is key to achieving real improvements in animal health and welfare, including the reduction of TB and other endemic and zoonotic diseases. A key element of the Strategy will be a Biosecurity Action Plan, which will set out how Government will work with stakeholders to improve the way that advice and training are provided. Clearly, the lessons learnt from previous disease outbreaks will need to be taken into account.

The farming community will have a vital role in defining how advice is best communicated and in ensuring that advice is implemented. In the main, we already know what basic measures can be implemented that can make a real contribution to reducing the risk of introduction of TB. The challenge is to ensure that the farming community understands and accepts the advice and brings about real changes in the way they manage health risks that threaten their animals. Incentives for improved farm health planning and biosecurity need to be explored. It is possible that demonstration farms and farm assurance schemes have a role to play in this.

The Government notes the Committee's statement on the average cost of a TB breakdown, but wishes to make clear that this is an industry estimate.

Government would welcome proposals from the farming industry for improved husbandry methods to reduce prevalence of TB. Government is keen to work in partnership with stakeholders in providing advice based on practical experience from the farming community. Government hopes that industry will develop its approach to take account of the ISG's analysis of TB 99's. The Government would be happy to facilitate discussions, but financial support will depend on the availability of resources.

**Recommendation 4: Defra should recognise the growing concern within the farming industry about the spread of TB to areas previously unaffected by the disease. It should therefore ensure that all dairy farmers are regularly updated, via its website, about the spread of disease and about the latest 'good husbandry practice' that is available to counter the spread of the disease (paragraph 16).**

Government accepts this recommendation. Each month Defra publishes provisional cumulative TB statistics for the calendar year on its website, including the number of TB tests carried out, the number of new TB incidents and the number of animals slaughtered in each region. However, Government is undertaking a review of the TB webpages of the Defra internet site and will take full account of this recommendation in that. The review includes plans to determine the feasibility of developing a TB interactive map where farmers can easily access information about disease incidence and test statistics.

Government has issued farmers with guidelines on good husbandry practices to try to minimise the transmission of TB. The booklets 'TB in Cattle - Reducing the Risk', 'Golden Rules for a Healthy Herd' and 'Farm Biosecurity - Protecting Herd Health',

have all been issued to farmers free of charge. The publications are also available via the Defra internet site.

At the end of June 2002, Defra issued a press notice emphasising the wisdom of minimising direct contact between wildlife and cattle. This followed publication by the Royal Society of research by Central Science Laboratory (CSL) scientists on the "use of farm resources by badgers and the risk of bovine TB transmission to cattle".

**Recommendation 5: We expect Defra to explain more fully developments relating to pre- and post-movement testing. We also ask that it consider:**

- **Whether ‘tuberculosis-free’ regions should be defined, and what rules should govern the movement of animals into such areas;**
- **What the implications of a positive test of an animal held in isolation following a movement should be both for its herd of origin and the herd it was to join; and**
- **What would be the costs and benefits of compulsory pre-movement testing (paragraph 18).**

Government will be exploring these issues in detail with stakeholders as part of the development of a TB Strategy. EU rules govern the definition of ‘Tuberculosis-free’ regions and movement of animals in and out of such regions.

**Recommendation 6: For the time-being, the SVS must concentrate on clearing the backlog of tests. In the longer term the Government should consult interested parties about the merit of introducing flexible, ‘on-request’ testing for tuberculosis (paragraph 19).**

Government agrees that the SVS must continue to concentrate on clearing the backlog of TB tests, as it has been the case for the last 14 months. The latest statistics available indicate that on 31 March 2003 the overall number of overdue tests stood at 4,511, representing a 27% improvement on the position at 28 February 2003, when 6,139 tests were overdue. This brings down the national TB testing backlog roughly to the level at the onset of the FMD outbreak of 2001. Tests overdue by 6 months or more now only account for 12% of the total backlog, compared to 64% in August 2002. The SVS, private veterinary practitioners industry bodies and herd owners alike should be credited for this ever improving situation. The threat of impending movement restrictions on overdue herds has also acted as a powerful incentive to clear the backlog. Herds with a TB test overdue by more than 6 months are now routinely placed under movement restrictions, pending satisfactory completion of the test. As already mentioned, TB tests overdue by 3 months or more (29% of the backlog) will also result in the imposition of movement restrictions with effect from 30 September 2003.

Government will consider with the farming industry how to make private or ‘on-request’ TB testing more appealing in the longer term. At present, private TB tests can be carried out by local veterinary inspectors (LVIs) outside the routine testing programme for a herd, usually on individual animals or specific groups of cattle at the owner’s request and expense. Those tests have to be authorised by the DVM and their results must be notified to the DVM. When reactors and/or inconclusive reactors (IRs) are disclosed at a private test the LVI carrying out the test must inform the DVM immediately by telephone. Such reactors and/or IRs should be dealt with as if they had been disclosed at an official test and the LVI should serve a notice enforcing TB movement restrictions as usual.

Despite encouragement from Government, the uptake of private testing by herd owners in the post-FMD era has been disappointing. The Government regards private TB testing as a key element for improving TB herd biosecurity. A key issue for discussion with industry in relation to this will be how the costs of any such testing should be borne.

**Recommendation 7: We welcome in principle the proposal to use ‘lay’ testers to clear the backlog of outstanding tests. Such testers may have a role to play in respect of diseases other than bovine TB. However, it is vital that lay testers are properly trained. We therefore recommend that the Government publish more detailed proposals about the qualifications it will require, taking into account the views particularly of the veterinary profession. The proposals should also outline the role combined lay testers and animal health officers based in Animal Health Offices might play in overcoming the shortage of veterinarians (paragraph 20).**

The Government is planning a full public consultation exercise in the summer of 2003 on a proposal to introduce an Exemption Order, under the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, to permit trained and competent lay people to perform tuberculin skin testing of cattle. The consultation will publish proposals for (i) training and a period of supervised testing prior to becoming an ‘approved tester’; (ii) the role of the lay tester; and (iii) the role of the veterinary surgeon. We propose that there should be a continuing need for quality assurance of the work of the approved lay tester, by veterinary surgeons accompanying the tester for a proportion of the visits.

**Recommendation 9: We understand the concerns of farmers. But we believe that the continuation of the culling trial is necessary to establish once and for all whether killing badgers has any impact on bovine tuberculosis in cattle. We therefore welcome the Minister’s clear statement that the Government will not sanction culling outside the trial areas whilst the trial continues (paragraph 28).**

Government notes this recommendation.

**Recommendation 10: We recommend that, as soon as practically possible in 2004, the ISG publish the number of TB99 forms collected in the current calendar year and an assessment of their suitability for analysis (paragraph 30).**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

**Recommendation 11: We acknowledge that the TB99 form is complex. But its value in providing definitive information to complement that found in the culling trial and other scientific work would be diminished if it was peremptorily changed (paragraph 31).**

Government notes this recommendation. The TB99 form is indeed long and complex, but the level of detail is important if the study is to tease out those aspects of beef and dairy farming that might have a role to play in pre-disposing livestock to, or protecting them from *M.bovis* infection. For any such approach to work, the net has, first, to be cast as wide as possible to catch any potential factor of importance.

The ISG has made clear its intention to carry out analysis of TB99 data as soon as the Department can deliver sufficient datasets for a realistic and representative analysis to be carried out. After initial analysis it may well be possible to narrow the scope to focus on key areas that might emerge as being of greater importance. This would lead to a shorter, more focussed, and hence easier, form to complete.

**Recommendation 12: We support the road traffic accident survey. If it is found over time to provide a good indication of the prevalence of bovine tuberculosis in badgers an extension to the survey should be considered (paragraph 34).**

Government accepts this recommendation, subject to availability of funding. The value of the Road Traffic Accident Survey, if found by validation, to be a good predictor of background to *M.bovis* infection in wildlife (specifically badgers) is not underestimated. The ISG has predicted that sufficient badgers will have been collected to carry out an initial analysis of the first full year's data from the RTA Survey this summer. It is possible that this analysis may indicate that further sampling is required in order to carry out the validation.

#### **Recommendations 13 and 14**

**Recommendation 13: If it requests advice Defra should obviously allow the ISG adequate time to provide it. But Defra is not obliged to follow the ISG's advice: Defra is responsible for the decisions made. However, the importance of a harmonious relationship between the ISG and Defra is such that in this instance it would be helpful for Defra to clarify the differences between the protocol it adopted and the advice it received from the ISG and provide some commentary on the reasons for the difference of approach (paragraph 36).**

**Recommendation 14: We ask that Defra now provide an update on recruitment to the pilot, detailing both the anticipated recruitment for each three month period of the trial and recruitment to date. Defra should also detail any changes it has made to the protocol since 9 October 2002, in response to the ISG's comments (paragraph 37).**

Defra officials and the ISG are continuing to discuss the suggested changes to the gamma Interferon pilot study. In particular, the ISG proposals have significant resource implications which need to be addressed. It is estimated that the ISG suggestion would cost an additional £3.5 million for a study comprising 150 herds. (The current pilot will cost £667,000 for the first 150 herds, although it is proposed that the pilot be extended to include 660 herds in total.) The ISG proposals would also impinge on the resources and facilities which are currently used both for ongoing high priority research studies, and for routine surveillance, monitoring and disease control purposes. It has not yet proved possible to reconcile these issues. No changes to the protocol have therefore been made to date although discussions are continuing.

The aim at the start of the Gamma Interferon trial was to recruit 660 herds over a period of two years. This equates to approximately 28 herds a month, or 84 herds a quarter. The pilot study began on 28 October 2002 and as at the end of the second quarter, 27 April 2003, 39 herds had been recruited. This equates to shortfall of 129 herds against plan. A review point for the trial has been set for when a total of 150 herds have been recruited.

Recruitment of herds to the study is on a voluntary basis and as such requires a Veterinary Officer from the State Veterinary Service (SVS) to visit individual cattle-keepers. Not all farmers approached choose to join the trial, for various reasons including potential impact on their business. As such, recruitment is proving to be very demanding on SVS resources.

**Recommendation 15: It is apparent that all interested parties would be willing to endorse the use of an *effective* bovine TB vaccine. Therefore, despite the long time-frame, research into the development of vaccines should continue. Moreover, other important lessons about the disease are likely to be learned from the vaccine research programme. However, the long time-frame means that Government and others cannot afford to pin all their hopes on the development of a vaccine. It would be helpful if Defra could provide a statement summarising the present state of work worldwide on the production of a vaccine by the veterinary medicines industry. Finally, the private sector should be encouraged to play a part in the development of a vaccine (paragraph 42).**

The Government is continuing to fund collaborative research into the development of vaccines for both cattle and badgers. In 2002, a scoping study to look at the feasibility of pursuing a TB vaccination strategy for either cattle or wildlife was set up as a sub group of the ISG. This group included members of the ISG, Defra officials, representatives

from industry and eminent scientists in the field of human and bovine TB. The present state of work on animal TB vaccination in other countries, particularly New Zealand and Republic of Ireland was also considered by the sub group. The report is due to be published shortly.

The Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) has set up a Vaccine Steering group to identify the administrative and legal processes that need to be followed to enable a vaccine to be used with minimum delay, once a suitable candidate vaccine is identified.

**Recommendation 16: We would therefore encourage the ISG to indicate why specified topics which have been drawn to its attention are not recommended for further study (paragraph 44).**

The ISG consults widely with members of the scientific community and others to continually review scientific requirements. It considers all scientific research proposals which Defra and others present to it and advises Government on their scientific validity and priority. In the specific instance raised by the Committee – the effect of trace elements such as selenium on the disease status of cattle and badgers – the ISG is aware of the background scientific information available, but it has not been asked to consider any worked-up research proposals relating to this area.

#### **Recommendations 17, 18 and 19**

**Recommendation 17: We recommend that the Government publish the terms of reference of and the plan of work for its review as quickly as possible (paragraph 45).**

**Recommendation 18: We therefore reiterate the call made by the Agriculture Committee that a “Plan B” be developed to address a situation in which the results of the culling trial are inconclusive (paragraph 47).**

**Recommendation 19: It would be reassuring for farmers and others if the Government would re-confirm what is the overriding aim of its TB Strategy (paragraph 48).**

Government is developing, in consultation with stakeholders, a TB Strategy. This will cover a period of up to 10 years. Government expects to issue a consultation document later this year. A number of shorter term measures, as announced on 20 February, are also under consideration.

The Strategy will address what will need to be done when the randomised badger culling trial is complete, whatever the results of the trial may be.

The Strategy will include a draft vision – a picture of where we would wish to be in 10 years time. The views of stakeholders will be sought on what that vision should be.

**Recommendation 20: Members of the TB forum should re-assess what role it should play and Defra should consider redefining its remit accordingly. It may have a particularly important role to play, for example, in communicating the results and validity of the current scientific research programme (paragraph 50).**

Government recognises that some parties have been frustrated in the way the TB Forum has operated and will be re-assessing its future with members. The TB Forum is currently the main stakeholder group for the consideration of matters relating to bovine TB. Relationships between Government and stakeholders will need to be addressed in the light of the Animal Health and Welfare Interim Strategy, and in the discussions on the TB Strategy.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
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