



House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

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

Seventeenth Special Report

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The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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The current staff of the Committee are Matthew Hamlyn (Clerk), Fiona McLean (Second Clerk), Jonathan Little and Dr Antonia James (Committee Specialists), Marek Kubala (Inquiry Manager), Louise Combs and Jim Lawford (Committee Assistants) and Anne Woolhouse (Secretary).

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SEVENTEENTH SPECIAL REPORT

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reported to the House on *Bovine TB* in its Thirteenth Report of Session 2003–04, published on 13 July 2004 as HC 638. The Government's Reply to the Report was received on 13 September 2004.

Government response

Introduction

The Government welcomes this report. Following the publication of the implementation plan for delivering the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy in England, the Government is now developing a long term strategy for bovine tuberculosis (TB) in Great Britain. The Committee's support of a bovine TB strategy and the recommendations in its report will be invaluable in taking that process forward.

The Committee has clearly identified that good animal husbandry practices play a significant role in helping to control bovine TB; and that farmers should demonstrate their commitment by following best practice guidelines in relation to husbandry.

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

Recommendation 1

We welcome the news of progress, however limited, in the development of a cattle vaccine. We strongly urge the Government to move forwards to field trials of available vaccinations as soon as possible. However, we concede that an effective cattle vaccine is some way off, and that even after one is found the problem of differentiating between vaccinated and previously infected animals, with the associated trade issues, will remain. We therefore acknowledge that in the medium or even long term cattle vaccination is likely to form only part – albeit a significant part- of the response to bovine TB. (Paragraph 20)

The Government is currently considering research requirements for the next three to five years. This consideration includes scientific review of potential field trials to test the efficacy of BCG in cattle either by means of natural transmission studies in cattle vaccinated as neonates in the UK and/or abroad or in a laboratory with suitable containment facilities. Natural transmission studies will probably need to be carried out on a larger scale than laboratory tests but offer the advantage of enabling us to evaluate how good the protection from vaccination would be in the field. This will be important in later consideration of what contributions cattle vaccination can make to an overall control strategy.

Alongside the field trials of BCG, the Government is also continuing to pursue the development of new vaccine candidates.

Recommendation 2

Spending more on research into cattle vaccines now and in the future may well mean less overall expenditure on bovine TB in the long run. We recommend that the Government reallocate resources accordingly. (Paragraph 21)

Over the last five years the Government has been funding research into developing a bovine TB vaccine, spending approximately £1.5 million each year. An independent TB vaccine programme advisor provides scientific advice and expertise in this area and ensures that proper links are made with human TB vaccine development. The Government is also working closely with researchers in Ireland and New Zealand to learn of any developments across the TB community internationally and draw on worldwide expert advice.

The Government continues to consider all the possible research options and invest in areas of vaccine development that will move us closer to the control of bovine TB. TB vaccine research is an extremely complex area but this integrated approach places us in the best possible position to target research funding appropriately.

Recommendation 3

We continue to support research which aims to develop a workable test to differentiate between vaccinated and previously infected animals. Such research must obviously proceed hand-in-hand with research into a cattle vaccine. (Paragraph 22)

The Government notes the Committee's support for research in this area, which is being considered for the next research requirements round.

Recommendation 4

We recommend that the Government seeks ways to carry forward the work to test the effectiveness of the BCG in badgers before the Randomised Badger Culling Trial is completed. Although significant hurdles remain, not least devising a reliable method of delivering a vaccine to a wild animal, we believe that a badger vaccine might have an important role to play in managing the disease—and it is clear that the development of a vaccine for badgers is some way in advance of one for cattle. (Paragraph 24)

The Government accepts the Committee's recommendation. The scientific studies necessary for the establishment of a field experiment to test the effect of BCG in the badger in a natural setting are already in hand.

In parallel with the field experiment, we are exploring oral formulations of vaccines suitable for delivery to wildlife, and hope to use an industry-based product development approach, ideally in collaboration with a commercial partner. At the end of April 2004 a workshop was held with the animal pharmaceutical industry to discuss how The Government, working in partnership with industry, might take BCG vaccine forward for use in badgers. The outcome of this meeting was positive and a way forward is being considered in conjunction with the future research requirements for 2005/06. However, some significant barriers to progress were also identified, and these are now under consideration.

Further to this there are the on-going experiments with a BCG vaccine in captive badgers in Ireland in collaboration with researchers at the Veterinary Laboratories Agency. The Government is monitoring progress carefully and has expressed an interest in developing a more formal relationship.

Recommendation 5

We recommend that Defra immediately commission research into other wildlife reservoirs of bovine TB infection. It should particularly look at the impact of vaccinating badgers on infection in other species, and the role played by other species in transmitting tuberculosis to cattle. (Paragraph 25)

A Central Science Laboratory project investigating the risk to cattle from wildlife species other than badgers recently confirmed that *M.bovis* had been found in five out of the six species of deer (roe, red, fallow, sika, muntjac) as well as other wildlife species. The authors carried out a basic risk assessment and highlighted that deer may pose a risk to disease in cattle. However more studies are needed as it is not clear what, if any, contribution any of the species examined in the study make to the problem of TB in cattle.

The Government is also awaiting the final report from a further research project looking at TB in wildlife, in particular small mammals. Together with this evidence, the future research requirements into the potential risk that wildlife may pose in transmission of TB to cattle will be considered.

Recommendation 6

We believe that the gamma interferon test has the potential to be a highly effective diagnostic tool. We recommend that Government provide financial incentives to farmers to join the gamma interferon field trial. Its aim should be to recruit 600 herds as soon as possible, and so to complete the trial quickly. (Paragraph 30)

The Government is disappointed at the current low level of farmer commitment to the gamma interferon pilot which, as the Committee points out, could have significant

benefits for the industry. The Committee's independent endorsement of the pilot is most welcome and will, we hope, help to gain greater industry support.

The Government has promulgated the benefits of the pilot by publishing an article in the Veterinary Record in July 2004. Further measures will include the circulation of a brief fact sheet that the industry can use to disseminate information about the pilot to their members. This will be available in the autumn, to coincide with the end of summer grazing in beef herds.

The Government is currently considering the efficacy of a range of options for improving farmer recruitment rates, including the potential for providing financial incentives. However, advisors' initial views are that providing financial incentives would breach state aid rules. Other non-financial measures currently being considered include reviewing how the benefits of the pilot are explained to individual farmers (by Defra staff) and whether more could be done to promote the pilot amongst veterinary professionals.

Recommendation 7

We recommend that the data gathered in the TB99 survey, together with other information, is used to identify good practice in animal husbandry, and that guidelines for farmers are drawn up based on that good practice. We further recommend that Defra communicate those guidelines clearly to farmers. (Paragraph 33)

The Government accepts this recommendation and welcomes the Committee's view that farmers need to demonstrate adherence to best practice husbandry guidelines.

Recommendation 8

Farmers should be aware that the Minister takes the view that good animal husbandry has a significant role to play in controlling bovine TB, and that he is considering using a number of powerful levers to ensure that best practice is followed. Notwithstanding their reservations about focussing on husbandry, rather than badger culling, we recommend that farmers demonstrate that they take their own responsibilities seriously by following best practice guidelines in relation to husbandry. Given that badger culling is unlikely to begin imminently, and that in any event it is likely to form only part of the response to the disease, it is vital that no stone is left unturned in dealing with bovine TB. (Paragraph 35)

The Government accepts these recommendations.

The Government will use the outcome of the analysis of the TB99 research data to identify factors and actions that farmers can take to reduce the risk of bovine TB; and will look to communicate these findings as soon as the analysis becomes available.

In 2003 the Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock, which contains good husbandry advice for farmers, was revised. It is a legal requirement for farmers to have access to, and be familiar with the Code.

In a new initiative under the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy for Great Britain, the Government has set up a Working Group of interested parties to encourage and support farm health planning as an everyday activity. The Working Group will be reviewing (and where necessary developing further) advice and training, communication networks and better dissemination of information. It is hoped this will ensure that the latest developments in farm health planning are communicated effectively to the wider research and teaching community as well as other interested stakeholders.

Recommendation 9

Although we do not believe that trace elements should become a main focus of research activity, they are clearly an area of interest. We therefore recommend that Defra consider ways in which it might encourage projects aiming to find out more about trace elements. (Paragraph 39)

Anecdotal evidence that trace element deficiencies in soils are related to susceptibility to tuberculosis to cattle has been presented on more than one occasion. It is postulated that deficiencies in trace elements such as selenium, copper and iodine result in a compromised immune response. In turn this leads to increased disease susceptibility. Dr Helen Fullerton has submitted a paper 'Bovine tuberculosis: a nutritional solution' to both the ISG and to the House of Commons Agricultural Select Committee (1999) for consideration. The ISG have not dismissed the possibility of a nutritional link but have felt that given the available resources for research, the link is not of sufficient priority for research funding.

However, the significance of trace elements has been considered as part of two projects funded by MAFF/Defra. One (SE3001) explored the possibility of an association between levels of trace elements in the soil and the spatial pattern of TB incidents in cattle herds in England and Wales. There was no obvious association between areas of low levels of trace elements and high TB occurrence from this element of the project. Another project (SE3013) compares the level of trace elements in blood samples from cattle which are positive (on culture) for bovine TB with the level in samples from cattle which are negative. This project is not due to finish until 2005.

It is also envisaged that the TB99 epidemiological survey will add to our understanding on the potential risks nutrition might pose. More detailed findings from this study are expected later in the year.

Recommendation 10

We agree with the Government that once the information gathered from the Irish Four Areas Study has been published and properly peer reviewed it should be carefully examined to see in what ways it might inform policy in this country. But we echo the comments of the Godfray report: even if the Irish study suggests that proactive culling has a positive impact on the incidence of bovine TB there are significant differences between Ireland and the United Kingdom which may well mean that the conclusions drawn about policy there differ from those drawn here. (Paragraph 42)

The Government notes the Committee's views and agrees that it will be necessary to undertake an analysis of any results from the Irish Study, taking into account the differences between Ireland and the United Kingdom, before using them as the basis for any policy decisions.

Recommendation 11

We recommend that the Government continue to work with the Irish Government and other Governments to seek solutions to our shared problem of bovine TB. (Paragraph 43)

The Government accepts this recommendation

Recommendation 12

We also support the Government's decision now to develop a new strategy to deal with bovine TB – but we are less impressed by the decision to consult about the matter. Defra must surely know by now what its key stakeholders think about this matter; and repeated consultations are unlikely to shift entrenched attitudes in any event. Now is the time for decisions and actions. (Paragraph 46)

We welcome the Committee's support for the development of a new strategy to deal with bovine TB. The Government published on 9 February 2004 a consultation document that represented the outcome of the first stage of the review of the TB strategy first announced by the Secretary of State in February 2003. Separate consultations were issued in Wales and Scotland.

Government action alone is not enough to have an impact on the spread of this disease and it is important that we work in partnership with key stakeholders who also need to play their part. This is a key principle of the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy. We therefore believe it was correct to consult on the new strategy and the package of short term measures.

The written consultation was not the limit of the recent consultation. The Government organised a series of regional meetings to discuss the issues raised in the written consultation document with a wide range of stakeholders.

We also plan to work closely with stakeholders in the next stage of the review with a view, to developing a new GB TB Strategy in 2005.

On pre-movement testing we believe the best way forward is to continue to work with stakeholders to develop detailed proposals along with assessments of the costs and impacts. The remaining short term proposals which were set out in the consultation earlier this year will be implemented as soon as practically possible.

Recommendation 13

The political reality is that culling badgers could only ever be a limited part of a policy to deal with the problem of bovine TB. But in any event we do not believe that any useful decision can be made about badger culling until the results of the Irish Four Areas Study and more importantly the Randomised Badger Culling Trial have been received and can be properly assessed. We do not therefore recommend that a decision to adopt culling as a policy response is taken prematurely. (Paragraph 47)

The Government notes the Committee's views and reaffirms its commitment to making any decision on badger culling on the best available evidence base.

Recommendation 14

We urge all concerned to respond positively to the challenges of bovine TB. We believe that the recommendations in this report set out a number of steps through which the Government and others can do so. (Paragraph 48)

The Government accepts this recommendation. The Government has introduced positive measures to control bovine TB and will continue to work with interested parties to seek solutions in managing this disease. We value this recognition that others also have a part to play, and propose to pursue the recommendations further in the developing TB Strategy.