



Badgers and Bovine TB (bTB): The Black & White (updated September 2014)

This is an overview of the issues. A more detailed report (with references) can be found at www.viva.org.uk/campaigns/badgers/factsheet.htm

What is Bovine TB?

Bovine TB (bTB) is an infectious and contagious disease of cattle caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium bovis*. Although the main reservoir and natural host of *M. bovis* is cattle, humans and a wide range of mammals, including badgers and deer, are susceptible to the bacterium.

Badgers are often blamed for spreading the disease, but the finger of blame should instead be pointed at politicians (failed agricultural policy and self-serving agendas) and bad farming practices (overworked animals, bad biosecurity, mass cattle movements, hunting and even fraud).

Bovine TB and badgers

There are less than 300,000 badgers in Britain. Already an estimated 50,000 badgers are killed on Britain's roads each year – around one sixth of the population. Although protected by laws to prevent badger baiting, licences can be granted by the Government for 'disease control' and 'research' reasons. Against public and much scientific opinion more badgers are to be killed in two areas of England in 2014 (parts of Somerset and Gloucestershire) despite independent assessment finding the 'culls' were 'ineffective and failed humaneness test'. This is as a continuation of trials into the effectiveness of free-shooting in 2013 (badgers will not be tested for bTB, probably because most will not have it). The 'culls' could be rolled out to new areas and could last 25 years or more. However, the Government freely admits that only a 16 per cent reduction in the trend increase of bTB is the best that could be achieved after 9 years of 'culling' 70 per cent of badgers. The reality is that it is likely to make things worse by pushing surviving badgers to new areas. The Government has announced badger vaccination programmes on the edges of 'cull' zones to try and prevent this, but will only 50% fund them. Wales rejected 'culling' in favour of vaccinating badgers in 2012. Currently there are no plans to 'cull' in Scotland, but badgers in Northern Ireland now face a 'selective cull' (capture and vaccinate healthy badgers and kill those with bTB).

Whilst badgers can catch bTB – possibly from eating grubs in cowpats – there is still a considerable question mark over how (or even if) badgers infect cattle with the disease.

Storm in a tea cup?

Is bTB in cattle a problem? Yes it is, but it's not quite the problem that politicians and farmers would lead you to believe. It is rarely fatal in cattle, with signs of infection usually only appearing in advanced cases. However, it does lead to reduced milk yields, making it a particular concern for dairy farmers looking to maximise their profits.

Also, according to the Government, the number of bTB incidences is actually decreasing in England and Wales and is at its lowest point since the year 2000 (incidences decreased from 4.4 per cent in 2012 to 3.7 per cent in 2014). The number of cattle compulsorily slaughtered has also decreased by 14% since 2012. There is a correlation between increased testing of cattle and this decrease in bTB. This has revealed a previously unknown reservoir in cattle (22 per cent of new cases are found at slaughter from herds not under restrictions). Clearly poor farming, bad biosecurity and unreliable testing are the main driving force behind the spread of bTB – not badgers.

32,620 cattle were slaughtered because of bTB in 2013. Compare these figures to approximately 90,000 dairy cows killed annually due to mastitis (infection of the udder), 31,000 due to lameness

and 125,000 due to infertility. It is also dwarfed by the 2,594,000 cattle that were slaughtered by the UK livestock industry in 2013 for their meat or when their milk productivity dropped. After all, farms are not sanctuaries and a cow is only kept alive as long as there is money to be made by doing so. The average British dairy cow is sent to slaughter at just five or six years old – bTB or no bTB.

Black and white scapegoats

So why do farmers want to kill badgers? Sadly, it's easier to target British wildlife than it is to face up to some home truths. Since the 1970s British herd sizes have doubled and now cows are producing more milk than ever. Her calf taken away at a couple of days, the modern dairy cow suffers the dual burden of another pregnancy and being milked at the same time. Like us, when we are overworked or tired our immune system can become compromised and we are more likely to become ill.

Bovine TB – as the name suggests – is a cattle disease mostly spread via cattle-to-cattle interaction. Despite this and other highly-contagious diseases, some 14 million cattle movements take place in Britain annually as farmers buy and sell stock (movements have quadrupled since 1999).

Biosecurity (the processes employed to halt disease spread) is sometimes ignored by farmers. A Viva! investigation at one Welsh market showed that 97 per cent of visitors ignored even the simplest precautions such as disinfecting their footwear. Some farmers have even been accused of swapping ear-tags on cattle, so that they can keep high yielding but infected cows; whilst sending low yield, but uninfected cows to slaughter in their place. Incredibly, it is not illegal to spread slurry from cows on farms with bTB infection and hunting could spread infection to new areas.

Not supported by the science

The most in-depth study into badgers and bTB was the £50 million, 10-year investigation by the Independent Scientific Group. Its findings in 2007 were clear: *“Badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute to the control of TB.”* As this did not support the pre-conceived notions of some farmers and politicians it was ignored.

‘Cull’ cruelty

Any badger 'cull' would be an animal welfare disaster. Mostly, night-shooting of free-running badgers is being utilised in England (supplemented with cage trapping). The potential danger of shooting in the dark for both wildlife and humans is clear. Because of their physiology, many badgers shot but not killed outright could die slow, painful deaths. Also, it is a myth that badgers suffer hugely with bTB, as many – like cattle – can live years without displaying clinical symptoms.

A sensible solution?

So how can we stop bTB? The rush to slaughter ignores new, non-lethal solutions. An injectable badger vaccine was scheduled to be trialled in England throughout 2010, but the coalition scaled back plans in June of that year. A cattle vaccine could halt the problem in its tracks.

Further limits on cattle movements, tighter on-farm biosecurity, a ban on hunting and improved testing would also curb the spread of bTB.

If, like us, you are outraged by this scapegoating of badgers as a cover for cruel, incompetent and unsustainable farming practises, there is also one blindingly obvious solution – reject meat, milk and other dairy products and switch to a vegan diet.

Get active for badgers at www.viva.org.uk/badgers or phone 0117 944 1000.

Viva!