

£200 million investment to fight zoonotic diseases

The UK's fight against zoonotic diseases, including avian flu and bovine tuberculosis received a major boost today (16 February) with the allocation of £200 million for a programme of investment into world leading research facilities.

The money will be spent on a state-of-the-art revamp of the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) scientific laboratories at Weybridge – enhancing the UK's already world-leading scientific and veterinary capability. Weybridge is renowned for its specialist research and laboratory facilities, and its animal health science and disease control capabilities – with a focus on tackling and eradicating high-risk animal diseases.

APHA is responsible for safeguarding animal and plant health. It was integral in controlling the devastating outbreaks of Foot and Mouth Disease in 2001, and is currently tasked with tackling the largest Avian Influenza outbreak on record. The outbreak of Covid-19, a zoonotic disease, has reiterated the importance of boosting our resilience to help prevent future pandemics.

New equipment and specialist testing facilities will mean APHA scientists can identify pathogens for existing and emerging threats posed by diseases spread by animals, and maintain our high biosecurity standards against Bovine TB, Salmonella and avian flu. Research at Weybridge has paved the way for field trials of a TB cattle vaccine which if successful will enable farmers to vaccinate their animals against this deadly disease.

APHA are also playing an essential role in tackling the largest outbreak of avian flu on record, supporting the rapid response to try to limit its spread and ensuring that the poultry industry is able to continue to operate. This investment in facilities will further enable Weybridge scientists to quickly sample, analyse and confirm the presence of bird flu in a location so APHA can act fast to tackle the threat.

Alongside these existing threats, the UK must be prepared for future risks from animal diseases which could pose a significant risk to UK farming and wildlife including African Swine Fever. This investment will offer APHA greater capacity to track diseases of concern across the globe and conduct research into a growing number of high-risk threats in advanced high-containment laboratories.

As well as protecting animal health and the wider public, a strong animal health science capability is crucial to protect the industries that rely on exporting animal and animal by-products, which were estimated to be in excess of £12 billion in 2019. This investment will enhance the UK's international reputation as a safe agri-food trading partner.

Defra Biosecurity Minister Lord Benyon said:

The UK is a world leader when it comes to science and biosecurity. I have seen for myself the remarkable work done by APHA in responding to the recent outbreak of Avian Influenza, and in paving the way for field trials of a cattle vaccine against Bovine Tuberculosis.

This investment builds on a long-term programme to future-proof our animal health capabilities, and ensure that we are at the forefront of defence against future pandemics.

DEFRA Chief Scientific Advisor Gideon Henderson said:

The Animal and Plant Health Agency provides top-quality scientific expertise and capability for the critical job of protecting the UK's animals, plant, and people from health risk. The importance of APHA's work for society and for the UK economy is shown again and again; witness their work on the present avian influenza outbreak, and the global Covid pandemic – a zoonotic disease.

This substantial investment in APHA's capability recognises the essential role of this government laboratory, and will enable its excellent scientists to continue at the forefront of research and policy to protect the country, boosting our resilience and strengthening our understanding of health risks to, and from, animals and plants".

UK Chief Veterinary Officer Christine Middlemiss said:

Fast, reliable testing and world class animal disease surveillance is vital in halting the spread of animal diseases and mitigating the risk of pandemics.

This investment ensures APHA can continue its critical role in animal health science and help stop the spread of disease.

APHA Chief Executive Ian Hewett said:

As the National Reference Laboratory for 48 animal diseases and an International Reference Laboratory for further 23 diseases, APHA's Weybridge science facility provides international assurance in the UK's biosecurity capability to protect the health of animals and people, and underpin trade relations.

As a result of this funding, work is already underway to transform the campus, paving the way for a future science hub which supports

our international reputation as experts in animal science and well-prepared national disease control.

The investment confirmed today will also enhance the capacity of the site to allow scientists to manage concurrent outbreaks and conduct research in parallel. This will help to control and eradicate animal and plant diseases and pests whilst reducing the risks from new and emerging threats.

Further information:

- In March 2020, a previous announcement included £1.2 billion in funding for the Science Capability in Animal Health programme at Weybridge as well as £200m for critical maintenance.
- The £200 million funding announced today is part of the £1.2 investment in the Science Capability in Animal Health programme