

Government sets out next phase of strategy to combat bovine tuberculosis

The government has today set out plans for the next stage of its strategy to eradicate bTB, including field trials of a cattle vaccine, plans to vaccinate more badgers against the disease and improved testing to intercept bTB earlier.

As a result of a globally significant breakthrough by the Animal and Plant Health Agency, the government will now accelerate the work towards deployment of the cattle vaccine within the next five years.

The commitment is [part of the government's response to an independent review](#) of its 25 year bTB strategy, led by Professor Sir Charles Godfray.

bTB is one of the most difficult and intractable animal health challenges that England faces today. More than 30,000 cattle are slaughtered each year due to infection from bTB and a cattle vaccination could become a powerful tool in the battle against the disease following the necessary testing and approvals to ensure its safety and efficacy.

Independent scientific analysis has shown that badger culling has resulted in significant reductions in the spread of the disease to cattle with disease incidence coming down significantly in the two areas analysed, with reductions by sixty-six and thirty-seven percent. However intensive culls, which currently cover fifty seven percent of England's High-Risk Area for the disease, are only one phase of the long-term bTB strategy to eradicate the disease by 2038.

As wider preventative measures are introduced, the response to the Godfray review sets out an intention to begin to phase out intensive badger culling.

Improvement of the cattle testing regime is also a key component of the strategy to combat bTB. Today's response makes clear the government's determination to have more sensitive testing which will intercept the disease earlier and remove it from cattle herds quicker.

Environment Secretary George Eustice said:

Bovine TB is a slow-moving and insidious disease leading to the slaughter of over 30,000 cattle every year and considerable trauma for farmers as they suffer the loss of highly prized animals and valued herds.

The badger cull has led to a significant reduction in the disease as demonstrated by recent academic research and past studies. But no one wants to continue the cull of this protected species indefinitely so, once the weight of disease in wildlife has been addressed, we will accelerate other elements of our strategy

including improved diagnostics and cattle vaccination to sustain the downward trajectory of the disease.

The government intends to start deploying badger vaccination in areas where the four-year cull cycle has ended, alongside ongoing surveillance of the disease in badgers in that area. After the infection in the badger population is dealt with by culling followed by badger vaccination, it will allow other measures such as cattle vaccination to be more effective. This is the combined approach needed to achieve the government's goal of eradicating the disease by 2038.

However, the government will retain the ability to introduce new cull zones where local epidemiological evidence points to an ongoing role of badgers in maintaining the disease.

UK Chief Veterinary Officer Christine Middlemiss said:

This ground-breaking research carried out by APHA has enabled us to embark on the first step of the field trials required to license the cattle vaccine and test it.

Whilst there is no single way to combat this damaging and complex disease, cattle vaccination will be a new tool for our multi-pronged approach to tackle it and importantly prevent it, providing vital support to our farming communities.

Bovine TB presents a global challenge and the UK can harness its world-leading science to develop solutions such as vaccination that could also be valuable to other countries.

The latest statistics on bTB in England show the overall number of new herd incidents of the disease down by 9% in the last year (to Nov 2019), a 10% reduction in the number of herds not officially free of the disease and a 4% reduction in the total number of animals slaughtered due to the disease. Full details of these statistics are available [here](#).

Surveillance testing for the disease, already mandatory in England's High Risk Area (HRA), will also be increased in frequency in two (HRA) counties – Shropshire and Staffordshire – from annual to six-monthly from later this year. It is expected this will be extended to all parts of the High Risk Area from 2021.

The Government response also sets out plans to step up engagement with partners across the livestock industry to develop the bTB strategy further. It contains a detailed action plan for the next five years.

The full Government response has been published online and is available to read [here](#).