



What we think about...

Bovine tuberculosis (bTB)

Date: October 2020

Core Message

1. We protect and care for places so nature and people can thrive. Sustainable livestock farming that is good for nature, carbon and people helps us to achieve our objectives.
2. Bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is a serious issue affecting Trust livestock tenant farmers who are helping us to manage our special places for everyone to enjoy. We recognise that badgers have a role in transmitting this disease and acknowledge the current, but limited, scientific evidence that badger culling may help address TB in cattle.
3. Our own approach to controlling this disease is guided by the requirement for any wildlife management and lethal control interventions to be humane, evidence led and safeguard local wildlife populations. Given the scale of the cull in England, the uncertain disease outcomes, and concerns over humaneness, we have taken the decision not to allow Government licensed culling on any of our land at this time.
4. Instead, we are working in partnership with our farm tenants to implement a programme of practical support, advice and 'biosecurity' measures to reduce their bTB risk. We are also supporting badger vaccination programmes on Trust land, which aim to control the disease while allowing badgers and cattle to coexist. We will continue to keep this work, and wider scientific evidence, under regular review.

Further information

Why is this issue important?

Bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is a serious issue affecting many livestock farmers across the UK. It can lead to serious emotional and financial impacts on farmers as well as suffering and death to huge numbers of cattle and badgers. The disease is directly affecting a number of our own livestock farm tenants.

Policy on bovine TB is devolved to governments in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England, government policy involves the licensing of badger culls in areas where there is sufficient support from landowners. In Wales, the policy is to not cull badgers but instead to deploy a combination of better disease surveillance, strict control of cattle movements, direct vet support to farmers, on-farm biosecurity measures and changes to husbandry. There is emerging evidence that these alternative approaches focused principally on cattle can make a difference.

In Northern Ireland a five year "Test, Vaccinate, Remove" (TVR) trial is currently taking place – badgers that test negative are vaccinated and those that test positive are removed. We are broadly supportive of this trial and await the results with interest.

The killing of native wildlife, particularly when Government funded and conducted over such a widespread area was always going to be highly controversial, and the Government cull in England has provoked sustained debate and campaigning from across the spectrum of this issue – including for the Trust.

The debate focuses on many complex aspects including; the science underpinning the culls; food and farming policy; ethical and welfare aspects of widespread culls of native wildlife (and domestic livestock); the financial costs of varying strategies; and the human and emotional toll for farmers in dealing with the impacts of this disease.

What is our current approach?

We protect and care for places so nature and people can thrive. Sustainable livestock farming that is good for nature, carbon and people helps us to achieve our objectives.

The Trust recognises that badgers have a role in transmitting this disease and acknowledge the current, but limited, scientific evidence that badger culling may help address TB in cattle. However, there are many other factors relating to cattle testing, movement and husbandry which are also important in controlling this disease. Given the scale of the culls in England, the uncertain disease outcomes, and the concerns over humaneness, we have taken the decision not to allow Government licensed culling on our land at this time.

We believe a holistic approach to managing TB in cattle and badger populations is needed - to support both people and nature. Our approach is also guided by the requirement for any wildlife management and lethal control interventions to be humane, evidence led and safeguard local wildlife populations.

Instead, we are working with a range of partner organisations to develop and support badger vaccination programmes on Trust land, which aim to control the disease while allowing badgers and cattle to coexist. We have also implemented a scheme for our farm tenants to help with practical 'biosecurity' measures to reduce their bTB risk, as well as providing support and advice. We will continue to keep this work, and wider scientific evidence, under regular review.

Our policy and approach is not universally welcomed. Some farming groups are calling on the Trust to allow our tenants in England to take part in badger culling projects due to the financial, emotional and welfare impacts of cattle contracting the disease and the attendant controls and restrictions that have to be imposed on farms as a consequence. They believe the science and evidence from current cull areas and government research supports this approach.

Bovine TB and the badger culling programme in England – further background information

Bovine TB is a complex disease, involving cattle testing, movement and husbandry, and the role of wildlife in the disease. In England, government policy involves the licensing of badger culls in areas where there is sufficient support from landowners. To date (Sept 2020) more than 40 areas have been licensed, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of badgers.

The science surrounding the badger culls is complex. The Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RBCT) highlighted that culling badgers can lead to disease control benefits in cattle, although this trial also showed that any benefits are offset against increases in cattle TB in surrounding areas, and by the fact that culling leads to increased disease spread in culled badger populations.

The current English culls are quite different to those conducted during the RBCT, they are farmer led (rather than government led), they are much larger in scale and they use different culling methods. Results from the first two cull areas has shown that this approach to badger culling is associated with reductions in TB in cattle.

However, given the limited number of areas so far assessed (2 out of 43) and the novel nature of the current culls, there remains much uncertainty over the likely outcomes of culling in other areas. There are also significant concerns by veterinary and animal welfare organisations over the humaneness of the culling methods (controlled shooting) used in these culls.

Where can I find more information?

- [NT website](#)
- [Bovine TB hub on Acorn](#)
- Bovine TB Project Manager: andy.robertson@nationaltrust.org.uk

Government Affairs and Advocacy lead:	Matt Williams
Individual with sign-off	Rosie Hails, Director of Nature and Science
Communications lead	Paul Adcock