

Bovine TB

Chief Veterinary Officer's advice on the outcome of the 2015 badger culls

Effectiveness of industry-led culling

1. The outcome of this year's culls indicates that industry-led culling can deliver the level of effectiveness required to be confident of achieving disease control benefits:

- a. Good progress continued to be made in Somerset, with the cull company successfully applying an appropriate level of targeted effort across the cull area.
- b. There was an improvement in effectiveness in Gloucestershire.
- c. In Dorset, the cull company effectively applied lessons learned from previous years to make a successful start to its cull.

2. In all three areas, there is no room for complacency. There is a need to carry out comprehensive surveys of sett activity early in 2016 to inform operational planning, and all companies must plan to continue to deliver a high level of targeted effort across the accessible area to maintain effectiveness.

3. Continued action is needed to provide confidence in the effectiveness of any future culls, for example through contractor training and assessment, robust operational planning and implementation and high levels of compliance with best practice guidance.

Humaneness of controlled shooting

4. The proportion of badgers retrieved after an accurate shot provides a measure of the likelihood of suffering due to a prolonged time to death. The retrieval rate recorded in 2015, based primarily on observations of shooters in the new area of Dorset, was consistent with that in Somerset and Gloucestershire in 2014.

5. Based on the accumulated evidence from culling in three areas, my view remains that the likelihood of suffering in badgers culled by controlled shooting is comparable with the range of outcomes reported when other culling activities, currently accepted by society, have been assessed, such as deer shooting.

6. In order to maintain high levels of accuracy, rigorous training and compliance monitoring will continue to be required.

Conclusions on disease control benefits

7. The badger population reductions achieved in the three areas have been evaluated on the basis of the numbers and locations of badgers culled and Natural England's assessments of the level and spatial distribution of culling effort deployed.

8. Given the level of badger population reduction estimated in the Somerset cull area in the last two years, the benefits of reducing disease in cattle over the planned four-year cull can be expected to be realised there. The level of reduction achieved should be at least maintained to maximise these benefits. Culling should continue in that area for at least one further year.

9. In Gloucestershire, there is evidence of a more successful population reduction in 2015. This should be checked by further sett surveys in 2016 and culling should be continued intensively in that area. Surveys should be repeated after the 2016 cull to confirm that the cull has delivered the required level of badger removal in order to achieve disease control benefits in cattle.

10. Dorset has achieved a good population reduction in 2015, to be confirmed by sett surveys in 2016 and maintained by further effective culls in 2016 and subsequent years.

Future of culling

11. Action to prevent infection of cattle from significant reservoirs of TB infection in local badger populations is an essential component of the Government's 25-year strategy to eradicate bTB in England. Proactive badger culling is currently the best available option and the licensing of further cull areas would be necessary to realise disease control benefits at regional rather than at local levels. This would require a systematic, reliable and consistently reproducible culling delivery model which draws on the experiences of the last three years to produce an effective approach which is scalable to an extensive level of deployment if so required.

12. If Ministers decide to extend culling to new areas as part of the eradication strategy, we will also need to consider how to address the ongoing risk of disease spread from badgers in existing cull areas so that disease control benefits in cattle will be maintained. To inform this part of the policy, consideration should be given to monitoring the disease status of badgers as well as badger populations within cull areas. It must be stressed that completion of four years of culling will not realise the full disease control benefits over time unless cattle controls and high levels of biosecurity continue to be applied rigorously within each cull area.