



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

Nobel House  
Area 4a  
17 Smith Square  
London  
SW1P 3JR

T: 03459 33 55 77  
helpline@defra.gsi.gov.uk  
[www.gov.uk/defra](http://www.gov.uk/defra)

Our ref: FOI2019/00901  
13 February 2019

## REQUEST FOR INFORMATION: Information on bTB

Thank you for your request for information of 10th January about Information on bTB. We have handled your request partly under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and partly under the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIRs).

The EIRs apply to requests for environmental information, which is a broad category of information defined in regulation 2 of the EIRs. Public authorities are required to handle requests for environmental information under the EIRs. They give similar access rights to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

We enclose a copy of the information you requested:

*1. Whether he (Michael Gove) has reviewed the scientific evidence for the cull?;*

Responsibility for badger control policy lies with the Minister of State George Eustice, who has reviewed the scientific evidence for the cull, in conjunction with civil servants.

*2. What percentage of the minimal number of dead badgers tested carried the bTB bacillus relative to the area concerned (there are apparently different strains)?;*

We are responding under EIRs. To supplement the existing comprehensive TB surveillance in cattle, in the 2016 badger control operations Defra initiated development of a TB surveillance program on badger carcasses obtained from the culling operations.

Post mortem and tissue sampling, followed by attempted isolation of *M. bovis* by culturing and genotyping is the most reliable method for diagnosing TB in badgers. However, challenges remain with this technique when the quality of the carcasses is variable. The percentage of badgers that tested positive, broken down by the degree of decomposition of the carcass (termed autolysis in the report) is in table two of the attached report.;

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bovine-tb-surveillance-in-wildlife-in-england-2016-to-2017>.



In 2017 a smaller scale carcase collection exercise was carried out to see if the speed of transporting carcases could be improved to reduce levels of decomposition. Blood sample collection for serological testing was also trialled as a potentially more efficient method to assess prevalence. Further post-mortem and blood sampling has been conducted during 2018 operations. Results from these exercises are not yet available.

*3. Whether Defra recognises the fact that animals other than badgers can carry bTB?;*

We are responding under EIRs. Other species pose a very low risk of spreading bovine TB. They are considered 'spillover' species and so they play an insignificant role in the persistence of bovine TB in England, particularly when compared with cattle and badgers (the two main reservoirs of infection in this country).

While all mammals can get TB most don't transmit it onwards. A study in 2006 tested 4000 wild and domestic animals from 16 species found on infected and nearby farms in England. It found 0 out of 76 rats infected compared with 3 of 43 badgers the only other infected animal found was a single bank vole out of 1307. Further information on this study can be found at the following link;

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1090023305002935#aep-acknowledgment-id30>

*4. What evidence Defra used to dismiss the suggestion that animals used in hunting could be a risk in the spread of b-18?;*

We are responding under EIRs. TB in dogs caused by *Mycobacterium bovis* in the UK is extremely rare. There is no evidence to suggest that dogs play a significant role in the persistence of bovine TB in England and that hunting with dogs contributes to the spread of the disease amongst cattle. Therefore, we have no plans to suspend all hunting activities for bovine TB control purposes.

*5. Whether, following the Kimblewick Hunt incident,*

*a) any testing of the animals of other hunts where the incidence of bTB in their area is high was considered or done;*

*b) if not, why not?;*

We are responding under the FOIA. Government veterinary experts have provided advice to the hunt kennels on the management of this outbreak. TB in dogs, caused by *Mycobacterium bovis* (the bovine TB bacterium) is extremely rare - this is the first case ever recorded in a pack of hounds in Great Britain. Hounds from the affected kennel have not been in contact with other hounds since the initial case was suspected. At this stage no further government action is considered necessary in relation to other hunts.

*6. Why has Defra not looked at the correlation between the number of hunt packs - stag, fox, beagle etc. and the incidences of herd breakdowns and had hunt animals tested as a precaution or to validate the assumption that such animals are not a risk?;*

There is no evidence that hunting contributes to the spread of TB amongst cattle or to hounds from other hunts. Likewise, there is no obvious correlation between the location of hunts and high incidence of TB in cattle. TB in dogs (canine TB), caused by *Mycobacterium bovis* (the bovine TB bacterium) is extremely rare - this is the first case ever recorded in a pack of hounds in Great Britain. We have limited funding for research projects and have not commissioned any formal research into the spread of TB from hunting hounds.

The Kimblewick hunt's territory covers parts of six counties - Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hampshire, Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire. In the 12 months to February 2017, there were 148 new TB incidents across these six counties, a small increase on the 134 new incidents in the previous 12 months. Most of this slight increase occurred in Oxfordshire and epidemiological analysis suggests this was mainly due to infected cattle purchases.

*7. Where a herd breakdown occurs why does Defra not insist that hunts do not cross pasture land on those and surrounding premises until the herd is deemed clear and the risk of cross contamination is reduced or negated?*

There are no plans to put in place a suspension of hunting activities surrounding bTB breakdowns. There is no evidence that hunting contributes to the spread of TB amongst cattle or, as in the Kimblewick Hunt case, to hounds from other hunts. We are not aware of any evidence to indicate that hunting or any other countryside activity or recreation may be a significant factor. Likewise, as stated over, there is no obvious correlation between the location of hunts and high incidence of TB in cattle.

Information disclosed in response to this EIRs and FOIA request is releasable to the public. In keeping with the spirit and effect of the EIRs and FOIA and the government's Transparency Agenda, this letter and the information disclosed to you may be placed on [GOV.UK](http://GOV.UK), together with any related information that will provide a key to its wider context. No information identifying you will be placed on the GOV.UK website.

We attach Annex A, explaining the copyright that applies to the information being released to you, and Annex B giving contact details should you be unhappy with the service you have received.

If you have any queries about this letter please contact me.

Yours sincerely

**Information Rights Team**  
[InformationRequests@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:InformationRequests@defra.gsi.gov.uk)

## **Annex A**

### **Copyright**

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## **Annex B**

### **Complaints**

If you are unhappy with the service you have received in relation to your request you may make a complaint or appeal against our decision under section 17(7) of the FOIA or under regulation 11 of the EIRs, as applicable, within 40 working days of the date of this letter. Please write to Nick Teall, Head of Information Rights, Area 4a, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3JR (email: [InformationRequests@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:InformationRequests@defra.gsi.gov.uk)) and he will arrange for an internal review of your case. Details of Defra's complaints procedure are on our [website](#).

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, section 50 of the FOIA and regulation 18 of the EIRs gives you the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) for a decision. Please note that generally the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have first exhausted Defra's own complaints procedure. The ICO can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office  
Wycliffe House  
Water Lane  
Wilmslow  
Cheshire  
SK9 5AF