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September 2014

The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP
Secretary of State

Dear Colleague,

The Government's comprehensive strategy to eradicate bovine TB

Launch of new vaccination scheme

This week we have launched a new Badger Edge Vaccination Scheme (BEVS) as part of our comprehensive strategy to make England TB free. Between 1997 and 2010, TB in cattle increased nine-fold, threatening the future of our beef and dairy industries and our nation's food security. England now has the highest incidence of TB in Europe – greater than the sum of all other EU Member States combined. In 2013 alone, 26,602 cattle were slaughtered in England because of bovine TB. It is vital that we work to make Britain disease free – doing nothing is not an option.

That is why this Government is pursuing a comprehensive strategy, based on best international practice and supported by leading vets, to ensure that England is TB free by 2038. The strategy has three key components:

- Vaccination in the edge area
- Cattle movement controls
- Culling in the high risk area



Badger Edge Vaccination Scheme

The BEVS will support badger vaccination projects in the Edge Area – which borders the bTB high risk area. The Edge Area covers counties in the middle of the country such as Cheshire, Oxfordshire and Hampshire. These areas are most at risk from the disease spreading from the South West and West Midlands. Vaccinating healthy badgers in this way is intended to create a buffer zone to help prevent the spread of bTB to new areas of the country where the incidence of bTB is currently low.

The package of support includes a funding award of up to 50 per cent of long-term costs for vaccinating, advice from field experts, free loans of equipment such as traps, and free vaccine supply. Eligible vaccination projects need to be predominantly in the edge area, and will be required to cover a minimum area of approximately 15km². More details, including eligibility criteria, information for applicants and a toolkit to help in establishing new vaccination campaigns, are available on GOV.UK and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library.

I hope that wildlife and farming groups, many of whom have been closely involved in the development of this initiative, will seize this opportunity. I want to use annual badger vaccination, over wider areas than is currently carried out, to show that vaccination has a role to play in combatting this disease.

The vaccination scheme is just one element of our comprehensive strategy to eradicate bovine TB, as vaccination doesn't cure sick badgers who will continue to spread disease. Our programme also includes strict cattle movement controls and culling in the high risk area, which overseas experience shows is vital to beating the disease.

Cattle Controls

As part of our determination to beat this disease, we continue to take tough but necessary steps tightening and extending cattle controls. Since 30 June, cattle herds which graze on commons have been subject to additional pre-movement testing requirements. From 1 October, we will be limiting further the number and type of movements that can happen without a pre-movement test and bringing an end to the practice of part of a herd coming out of TB restrictions before the rest of the herd has tested free of the disease. Introduction of post-movement testing of cattle moved from higher risk areas to the parts of the country where outbreaks of bovine TB are thankfully still a rarity is also on our agenda. We are working hard to make risk-based trading – getting farmers to manage the TB risk associated with traded cattle – the norm in future.

We are reinforcing the regime for tackling the disease in non-bovine farmed species, such as alpacas, despite the fact that cases are few at present and the risk of transmission from those species to cattle is very low. We are also delivering on the undertaking in our strategy to influence herd owners to improve their biosecurity. An industry working group will deliver a new action plan before the end of the year.



Culling

As part of our comprehensive strategy, culling continues to have a vital role to play in those areas of England where the disease is rife and this year will see the second year of culling in Somerset and Gloucestershire. Leading vets support this approach. Taking on the recommendations of the Independent Expert Panel, we have made improvements to the culls this year. The operators have undergone increased training to improve the humaneness and effectiveness of the cull, and there will be monitoring in place to assess progress. The culls will also be independently audited. Following the issuing of the letters of authorisation and minimum numbers, the timing for the start of the six week culls will now be decided by the two licensed companies.

The experience of Australia, Ireland and New Zealand is that culling is an important element of any comprehensive strategy to eradicate TB. This approach has worked in Australia, which is now TB free, and Ireland and New Zealand, where incidence has been greatly reduced. Ireland has seen its numbers of infected cattle drop by nearly two thirds since 1999. For the first time since the 1950s, the Irish Government think they can achieve TB free status. New Zealand is on the verge of achieving TB free status after introducing a cull of possums, which carry TB. The number of infected cattle and deer herds dropped from 1,700 in the mid-1990s to 87 in June 2013.

The measures we have in place together amount to a comprehensive strategy which includes a rigorous cattle surveillance programme with isolation, removal and slaughter of animals; controls on cattle movements; other biosecurity measures; vaccination of badgers in the edge area; and culling of badgers in those areas of the country where the disease is rife and cattle measures alone will not be enough. This balanced approach is one that is supported by the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Defra's Chief Scientist, Defra's Chief Veterinary Officer and other leading vets such as the British Veterinary Association.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Truss MP

Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

