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The Secretary of State
Dept. for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House
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13th July 2006

An open letter on badgers and bovine TB

Dear Mr. Miliband

We, the undersigned members and past members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, urge you to reject the advice, based on results from the Randomised Badger Culling Trials, currently being offered to you by the chairman of the Independent Scientific Group, Professor Bourne.

The only conclusion to be drawn from the Randomised Badger Culling Trials is clear cut. They demonstrate that perturbation, the effect of grossly inefficient culling, serves only to disturb badgers and disperse both the animals and the disease. The reported culling rates achieved in the RBCTs were extremely poor at 20-60% (DEFRA 2005) and 30% in some triplets (Hansard, 29 April 2004, col. 1189). The culling methodology employed by the ISG was so badly flawed that the trials can neither form a basis for future badger control nor inform the scientific debate. The RBCTs certainly do not provide, as Professor Bourne claims, a robust scientific base. However, the scientific debate was more than adequately informed prior to 1998 by the three English culling trials at Thornbury, Steeple Leaze and Hartland Point and by the large Irish trial in East Offaly. All four of these trials achieved culling targets of >80% and produced a profound and sustained reduction in bovine TB in associated cattle herds. The more recent Four Counties trial in Ireland confirmed these results. Perturbation was not recognised in these earlier trials. But the phenomenon had been described in the mid '80s and the ISG should have realised the likely adverse effects of their hopelessly inefficient culling methods (Please see the attached appendix for a detailed breakdown of the failings of the RBCTs)

Whilst describing the evidence for badgers being the important wildlife reservoir for bovine TB as being compelling, Krebs, in his report of 1997 to your predecessor, raised doubts about the scientific basis of the culling trials referred to above in so much as they did not include no-culling control areas. Accordingly his report recommended the so called "Krebs triplet trials". This the Government seized upon and we have had 8 years of the RBCTs, during which time the disease in cattle has risen from 5,000 cattle slaughtered as reactors in 1998 to over 29,000 slaughtered in 2005 (see enclosed figure). However, the failure of the RBCTs to inform future policy in no way invalidates the earlier evidence, which could not be more clear cut. And the criticism of these trials by Krebs, and now by Professor Bourne, for not having no-culling control areas is no more than a scientific nicety given their unequivocal results. But if one seeks a control group you only have to look at the situation in the rest of the country for which the trend was then, as now, ever upwards.

Furthermore, contrary to the assertion by Professor Bourne that past TB control policies failed, bovine TB, as you may see from the enclosed figure, was practically eradicated by 1986 by strategic badger culling along with tuberculin testing of cattle; only 84 herd breakdowns were recorded in that year. But doubts were raised about the welfare aspects of the gassing method used and culling was modified, first to a clean ring trapping policy and then to the compromise policy of limited on farm reactive culling. And from 1997, except for the RBCTs, culling was abandoned altogether. Since then the incidence in cattle has risen relentlessly and is now increasing 18-20% year on year. And, as the Government acknowledges in their report of 2004, if the present policy of inaction continues there is no way but up.

Finally, the naïve advice being offered by Professor Bourne that rigorous implementation of cattle based measures alone can be expected to have a major impact on the disease has to be rejected. It totally ignores the fact that in endemically infected areas at least a quarter of badgers carry the disease (26% in 1998, when figures were last available, and rising). Highly susceptible cattle simply act as sentinels for the disease in badgers. Thus killing more and more cattle while ignoring the wildlife reservoir in badgers will not and cannot solve the problem, furthermore to pretend that enhanced biosecurity measures to keep badgers and cattle apart can be effective, particularly at pasture, takes naivety into the realms of absurdity. And we caution most strenuously against reading anything significant into the recent turn down in the number of reactors slaughtered in the last 3 months, which is unlikely to be sustained and is probably associated with a coincident change in the tuberculin test material.

It is clear to us that the flawed self serving advice being passed on to Government by the ISG represents a major obstacle for any realistic progress to be made in tackling this important and escalating disease problem. Only resumption of the combined strategy of effective badger culling in endemically infected areas and tuberculin testing of cattle nationwide can be expected to bring bovine TB back under control. Failure to do so can only result in an ever increasing upward spiral of disease in cattle and spread to other species, including man; a disease for which the Government is obliged under EU law to develop an eradication policy, as enshrined in directive 77/391/EEC

I enclose for your additional information the submission made by the Veterinary Association for Wildlife Management to the Government's Badger Culling Consultation, which in addition to targeted culling of badgers in endemically infected areas, calls for nationwide control of the badger population as a whole and research into gassing with CO₂/CO as an effective and humane method of culling, both as a matter of urgency.

Yours sincerely

Dr. L.H.Thomas, Secretary, Veterinary Association for Wildlife Management, former veterinary pathologist, IAH, Compton

Signed on behalf of 69 veterinary colleagues