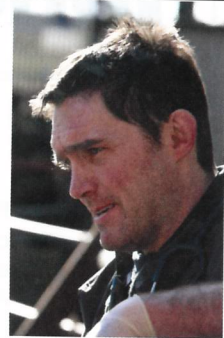


# Keep the politics out of bovine TB control



Jamie Day talks to vet Den Leonard

**B**adger culling has been proven to reduce the incidence and spread of bovine tuberculosis in disease hot spots, and is part of the long-term TB strategy for England agreed by the Coalition government. But the Labour party, should it be elected to power, is committed to ending the cull in favour of vaccination against the disease, a measure which is not yet proven to be effective.

Veterinarian Den Leonard is a partner in the Lambert May and Leonard practice operating in the dairy belt of Cheshire and Lancashire. He is very concerned that without an effective policy to manage the disease in the badger population, bovine TB will continue its steady spread radially in the badger population.

The issue was debated at the recent *Farm Business Dairy Forum* in London. Delegates noted that it had taken years to agree and implement the 25-year TB strategy for England, but that the policy has full government, industry and veterinary support. The strategy comprises a series of measures including enhanced cattle testing; more testing at the edges of infected areas and badger culling wherever it is required – starting with the two pilot culls in Somerset and Gloucestershire.

However, the issue has become a political football, with support and opposition to the culls divided on party lines. Forum delegates called for the control of bovine TB to become a cross-party issue, one that is treated in the same way as national security and the threat of terrorism. The disease is too important and affects too many livelihoods to ‘play politics’ with.

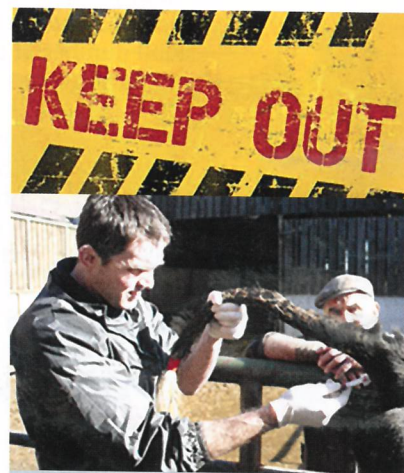
The strategy needs time to demonstrate its effectiveness. Farmers in the pilot cull areas have been intimidated and threatened by those opposed to the cull, but have been undeterred, as they believe the future of their farming operations is at stake. Cattle farmers in the pilot areas are reported to have seen falls in the rate of removal of infected cows from their herds due to bovine TB infections, compared to the previous 11 years. It is suggested that the cull has led to a 60% drop in the incidence of the disease in the pilot areas.

In future, there may be a place for techniques such as DNA testing of infected setts to locate badger social groups infected with bTB, and for the vaccination of wildlife and cattle. Until alternative measures are proven to be effective, culling must be maintained. Despite the media hype, it is not about killing badgers, but preventing the further spread of the disease – especially into Cheshire and the North West.

“Culling badgers remains the only proven method of reducing TB in cattle hot spots,” stresses Mr Leonard. “The Labour Party, should it be elected, has promised an immediate end to badger culling, even in the pilot cull zones, despite independent scientists stating that this would create a risk of increasing bovine TB. Labour’s preferred method of control is vaccination, even though it is scientifically proven that this fails to prevent badgers from becoming infected with the bTB bacteria. Also, there is no evidence whatsoever that vaccination delivers any benefit in terms of bTB reduction in cattle.”

Mr Leonard notes that the Welsh Assembly is spending £1 million per year on a trial badger vaccination programme across just 1% of the country. Therefore a full national programme would cost in the region of £100m annually. But the trial only captures and vaccinates 70% of the badgers in the pilot areas. While the vaccine can check the progression of the disease in badgers, it does not stop the animals from becoming infected or cure badgers with the disease.

“Draconian cattle measures without wildlife controls were attempted by Tait in South West England and Downie in Ireland, but both had no effect on the level of bovine TB in cattle and had to be abandoned,” he concludes.



**“Culling badgers remains the only proven method of reducing TB in cattle hot spots”**