

# 'Risky' cattle trading heightens bovine TB risk in the North West

By Jeremy Hunt

TB will soon sweep across the major cattle counties of Lancashire and Cumbria unless there is a huge mindset change among farmers to stop the trading in "risky" cattle, according to vets.

This stark warning was given at a TB meeting in Lancashire organised by vet practice Lambert, Leonard and May following a recent rise in the number of reactors on farms in the county.

If the rate continues to spread across the region, the disease will have a devastating impact similar to that experienced in TB-ravaged counties in the South West, a recent meeting at Myerscough College heard.

Farmers were also told not to underestimate the inevitable threat of an EU ban on all UK cattle exports if the escalating level of TB reached the trading-ban threshold figure.

## SIGNIFICANT LOSSES

Cheshire dairy farmer Ian McGrath, who sits on DEFRA's TB eradication group, has suffered significant losses to his own herd after 12 years of TB testing.

"Don't assume the government will go on indefinitely funding compensation at the current rate," he said.

"We could see payouts drop to 75% or even 50% of the current table valuations for infected cattle in England."

While the meeting heard some support for pre- and post-movement testing, deep concern was expressed about the irresponsible actions of farmers when potentially infected cattle were "off-loaded" into markets.

Cheshire farmer Phil Latham said there was a continual risk of further spread because "the risky cattle go into risky hands".

"We need mandatory risk-based trading and for farmers to start behaving differently," he added.

"Quite often people who have a TB outbreak hide it and are then very happy to offload stock into markets with no regard at all about where those cattle are going. This is a big part of the TB problem."



Some farmers and vets want to see compulsory tagging of all inconclusive reactors.

Mr Latham, who lost 74 cattle in his first TB test on his farm in Nantwich, called for mandatory annual TB testing for all herds because four-year parish testing was a "long way off tracking the disease".

Den Leonard, vet and senior partner in Lambert, Leonard and May, sent a clear message to Lancashire farmers: "Cattle farmers as an industry have got to face the true horrors of this disease. There has to be a committed and con-

certed effort to stop the spread," he said.

"The government won't introduce any legislation that's going to help. There's no shortcut, no easy way. This disease has to be tackled by farmers and vets."

## STRONG DEBATE

The risks posed by inconclusive reactors, on an assumption they may be clear of TB, sparked a strong debate leading to a call for a campaign for compulsory tag-

ging of all inconclusive reactors (IRs) cattle.

"Inconclusive reactors are a real nightmare. Table valuations are one thing, but being shut up with TB for a long time because you've hung on to IRs is another," said Mr McGrath.

Auctioneer Trevor Wilson, from North West Auctions at Kendal, said he was increasingly concerned about the lack of urgency "at the top" to get the spread of TB under control in the North West.

"Things just aren't happening fast enough. The current situation is farcical. There should be an overnight 3km shutdown following a TB outbreak. DEFRA is three months behind the disease."

A DEFRA spokesman said: "Protecting the low-risk status of areas such as Cumbria and Lancashire is a key part of our strategy to eradicate bovine TB from all parts of England."

"That is why we take a robust and rapid approach in dealing with the sporadic cases we see in these areas by restricting cattle on farms and tracing cattle that have been sold on."

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## BADGER TRUST CONSIDERS NEW LEGAL BID

\* The Badger Trust is considering a fresh legal challenge to stop the pilot culls continuing for a second year in the South West.

Dominic Dyer, chief executive of the Badger Trust, said: "We are seeking legal advice and reviewing what legal action we can make to stop the pilot culls in Somerset and Gloucestershire."

"We have been discussing legal action with our legal advisers. We are moving in the direction to look at this as a viable option."

The charity has previously

lodged two judicial reviews with the Court of Appeal in London over the government's decision to allow badgers to be culled in England to tackle bovine TB.

But on both occasions, judges rejected the appeals.

A DEFRA spokesman said: "Bovine TB is a terrible disease that is devastating our cattle and dairy industries and causing misery to many people in rural communities."

"Tackling the infection in wildlife in high-risk areas is an essential part of our strategy to achieve TB-free status."