

Fury at lack of progress on TB

By Philip Case

Farmer anger and frustration over a lack of progress and delays in government policy to deal with bovine TB was laid bare at an NFU meeting this week.

The meeting brought together leading experts on bovine TB, who provided farmers with an update on the work being carried out across the country to develop new tools to tackle the disease.

About 80 farmers came together for the conference at the NFU's headquarters at Stoneleigh, Warwickshire, on Monday (17 November).

Defra scientists said a cattle vaccine and associated diagnostic test, an oral TB badger vaccine, and an appropriate methodology for gassing badgers were still a long way from being marketed in the UK.

However, diagnostic tools to help diagnose TB more accurately in cattle and possibly badgers were "very much closer".

While the wait continues for new tools to tackle TB, farmers and vets expressed their fury that the government had delayed extending the pilot badger culls in Somerset and Gloucestershire to other counties where the disease is crippling herds.

They said they were being sub-

jected to tougher cattle controls but not enough was being done to tackle the vector of disease in wildlife.

NFU county chairman Andrew Guest said: "Most of the farmers in the room are quite happy about all the suggestions about what we can do with cattle.

"But what we're not happy with is to do all that and see nothing being done about the other host [badgers].

"Until we can get the cull of wildlife, which we are doing in my county, across all of the infected areas, you are going to struggle to get farmers to accept any other suggestions.

"We have seen trial after trial. Six trials have shown that every time you cull badgers you get a reduction in cattle slaughtered. How many more trials do you need?"

Defra officials told farmers that a six-month TB testing regime would be introduced from January in Cheshire – a county on the "edge area" of the disease.

Cheshire vet Den Leonard said he was concerned there was too much focus on vaccination and not enough on getting TB levels down in badgers.

He said it was a "disgrace" tests on badgers in TB hotspots had shown that half were infected with TB.

He added: "We need to help people to understand that to get the disease down in that population of animals, which I care about, we need to manage that population."

NFU deputy president Minette Batters summarised the meeting, saying: "We are the only country in the world dealing with a wildlife reservoir that is protected. That makes our situation completely unique.

"I am absolutely determined that if nothing else, before the next election, we will have a TB Eradication Board for England. The NFU will leave no stone unturned in its mission to beat this disease."

BOVINE TB TOOLS

- * Badger gassing – government trials of gassing setts are being undertaken. No timetable for rollout.
- * Badger cull – pilots trials under way in Somerset and Gloucestershire. Decision to roll out the cull to other counties expected after the general election.
- * Oral badger BCG vaccine could be deployed by 2020.
- * UK field trials of TB vaccine for cattle in late 2015. Unlikely to be commercially available until at least 2023.