

Politics of bTB control



Jamie Day looks at the latest debate

Delegates to the recent *Farm Business Dairy Forum* have 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 issue has become a political football, with support and opposition to the culls divided on party lines.

Badger culling has been shown to reduce the incidence and spread of bovine tuberculosis in disease hotspots, and is part of the long-term TB strategy for England agreed by the coalition government. The Labour party is committed to

ending the cull in favour of vaccination, a measure not yet proven to be effective.

Vet Den Leonard, a partner in the Lambert May and Leonard practice operating in the dairy belt of Cheshire and Lancs, worries that without an effective policy to manage the disease in the badger population, bovine TB will continue its spread radially in the badger population and bring the disease into more cattle farming areas.

PILOT CULLS

The TB strategy for England measures include 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. It is suggested that the cull has led to a 60% drop in the incidence of the disease in the pilot areas.

“Since badger culling has been done, these losses are looking like coming to an end as they get clear of bovine TB,” says Mr Leonard. “Culling badgers remains the only proven method of reducing TB in cattle hotspots. The Labour Party, should it be elected, has promised an immediate end to badger culling, even in the pilot zones, despite independent



Vet Den Leonard

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 that vaccination delivers any benefit in terms of

bTB reduction in cattle.”

He notes that the Welsh Assembly is spending £1 million per year on a trial badger vaccination programme across just 1% of the country and that a full national programme would cost about £100 million annually. However, 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 – so it is not an effective tool in preventing the spread of bovine TB.