

Comment

More delay

NEWS that the Government is likely to delay a decision on whether to allow badger culling to help tackle bovine TB in cattle in England has met with approval from those who are opposed to any cull and disappointed those who believe a cull is necessary to bring the disease under control. This is hardly surprising. Opinion on the benefits or otherwise of culling badgers has long been polarised and seems likely to remain so for some time to come. Indeed, it is the fact that opinion is so polarised that has made progress on this issue so difficult.

Some have suggested that the delay may have been influenced by the Government's 'U-turn' last week on Defra's plans to sell off the nation's forests; having been surprised by the strength of public opposition to its proposals on this issue, it might be reluctant to provoke public opinion further by moving forward with another controversial proposal so soon. However, judging from remarks by Caroline Spelman, the Secretary of State at Defra, at the BVA's annual London dinner earlier this month, Defra may have already been prevaricating on a decision on badgers. In response to a remark from the BVA President, Harvey Locke, that the BVA was looking forward to hearing the outcome of the consultation on controlling badgers that was undertaken by Defra last year, Mrs Spelman replied: 'I know you, like your farmer customers, are anxious for a decision to be made. But it's a difficult and sensitive issue and the experience of other administrations is a stark warning that we have to get it right' (*VR*, February 19, 2011, vol 168, pp 171-172).

Defra's consultation document on tackling bovine TB was published in September last year. The option of culling

badgers had effectively been ruled out by the previous government, which instead pinned its hopes on cattle controls and continued research on vaccination. The September consultation document noted that cattle controls would continue to be central to England's bovine TB control programme. However, arguing that 'we have to use every tool in the tool box', it also included recommendations for controlling badgers, fulfilling a commitment made by the Conservatives before the General Election in May. Comments on the proposals were invited by December and the Government said it intended to publish a 'comprehensive and balanced' bovine TB eradication policy early in 2011.

Elaborating on the reasons for the delay at the NFU's conference last week, Jim Paice, the agriculture minister, indicated that, if culling went ahead, it was important to ensure that it worked. He also indicated that there were practical issues to address and that the proposals needed to be robust enough to survive a judicial review if challenged (see p 199 of this issue).

Under Defra's proposals, farmers and land owners would be able to apply for licences that would allow them to cull or vaccinate badgers on their land. Culling would be at their own expense and subject to strict licensing criteria. It could only be carried out in areas of 'high and persistent TB', over a minimum permitted area of 150 km²; a commitment to sustained culling for at least four years would be required, but should not lead to local extinction of badgers. Because of the large areas involved, Defra would expect to receive licence applications from groups of farmers and landowners, who would have to demonstrate that they could

access at least 70 per cent of the total land area in which the cull was proposed. Cage-trapping and shooting, and free shooting, of badgers would be the only culling methods allowed (*VR*, September 25, 2010, vol 167, pp 465-466).

Both the BVA and the British Cattle Veterinary Association have long argued that bovine TB cannot be tackled effectively without measures to control the disease in wildlife. They therefore welcomed the commitment to a balanced package of measures, and recognition by the Government that it will not be possible to eradicate bovine TB without also addressing the reservoir of disease in badgers. The two organisations commented on specific aspects of Defra's proposals in a joint response to the consultation, which is available to BVA members on the association's website, www.bva.co.uk. In doing so, they made the general point that badger controls were just part of the package of measures needed to eradicate the disease and, while necessary, would not work in isolation. They also pointed out that it was particularly important to ensure that culling was carried out humanely.

Given the sensitivities surrounding the issue and the practical issues that need to be addressed, it was always ambitious of the Government to think that it could sort out its strategy so quickly, and it is indeed important that it gets this right. However, the problem of bovine TB is not going away. Although most attention has focused on badgers, improved cattle controls formed part of the proposed package and the Government needs to clarify its policies soon.

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