

PM urged to revoke badger culling licences

By Kathryn Clark

A GROUP of vets, former government advisers, wildlife experts, animal welfare campaigners and an MP have written to the prime minister asking him to intervene to prevent the issuing of new badger culling licences this autumn.

Their letter calls on Boris Johnson to instruct the Defra secretary of state to revoke culling licences and explore alternative methods for disease control.

Coordinated by vets Iain McGill, director of the Prion Group (which publishes independent scientific research and campaigns on animal protection issues), and Mark Jones, head of policy at the Born Free Foundation, the letter's cosignatories include former deputy chief vet Alick Simmons, Jane Goodall, the renowned primatologist, Chris Packham, naturalist and broadcaster, and Caroline Lucas, the Green Party MP.

Building their case for the prime minister's intervention, the signatories point to evidence that they say calls the current culling strategy into question. They state that while mathematical modelling had indicated that the bovine TB (bTB) situation in cattle in a Gloucestershire cull area improved after four years of culling, analysis of subsequent data released by the APHA 'demonstrated that both the prevalence and incidence of disease in cattle herds in the Gloucestershire pilot cull zone were higher following five full years of culling than before culling began'.

Also, while bTB incidence fell in a Somerset pilot cull zone, the prevalence among cattle herds 'remained static' over the cull period, and in a Dorset pilot cull zone 'the prevalence increased by 20 per cent over three years of culling'.

They also highlight the 'dire sensitivity' of the tuberculin skin test, describing this as 'the main reason for Defra's failure to control bTB'.

'The failure of this standard skin test leaves a huge occult burden of tens of thousands of infected cattle



KEY ARGUMENTS

Campaigners say evidence from culling zone pilot areas shows a mixed picture:

- Gloucestershire – prevalence and incidence of bTB cattle herds were higher after five years of culling than before culling began.
- Somerset – bTB incidence fell but prevalence among cattle herds 'remained static' after five years.
- Dorset – prevalence increased by 20 per cent over three years of culling.

in the high risk area alone. If Defra were serious about getting bTB under control, it would immediately introduce an appropriate testing methodology,' they say.

They add that 'unless the hidden reservoir of infection is brought under control, the eradication of bTB in cattle is entirely unachievable by 2038, and badger culling a mere smokescreen for policy failure'.

The letter says that badgers are not heavily infected. It notes that only three of 313 culled badgers tested postmortem in Cumbria in 2019 were positive for *Mycobacterium bovis*, and one of these was infected with a strain that was unrelated to herd breakdowns.

Also, it says, no formal disease risk analysis for the bTB policy has been conducted, and the attribution of sources of infection for cattle is not rigorous. It claims that 'unscientific and subjective reports' are being used as 'evidence' that badgers present a high risk to cattle 'in order to justify the continued killing of badgers'.

The letter notes that, in its response to the Godfray review of

the government's bTB strategy, the government said it would phase out intensive culling of badgers and instead move to badger vaccination (VR, 14 March 2020, vol 186, pp 300–301). However, 'in spite of these promises', supplementary badger control licences were issued in May this year for seven cull zones that had completed four years of culling.

'Indications suggest that your government intends to initiate a huge expansion of killing by issuing as many as 11 new licences this autumn,' the letter continues.

Noting that the government has the power to direct Natural England not to issue licences for killing badgers, the letter refers to a 'political decision' to prevent licences being issued in Derbyshire last year (VR, 21 September 2019, vol 185, p 322). The decision was subsequently upheld by the High Court in May this year.

'As the judgement in this case made clear, this was not a scientific but a political decision, made at the behest of the prime minister. You are the only person who has ever intervened to revoke a licence to kill badgers,' the letter says.

It continues: 'We applaud your government's stated aim of phasing out badger culling, but this appears to be in stark contrast to your apparent intention.'

'We urge you Prime Minister to honour those words and intervene to prevent the huge expansion in badger killing currently slated for September...If you instruct your secretary of state to revoke licences and explore in short order the alternative methods for disease control that we describe, public opinion and sentiment will be with you. If, however, your government chooses to continue the discredited and ineffective badger culling policy, you will be remembered as the prime minister who presided over the greatest slaughter of a protected animal in living memory.'

The full letter can be read online at <http://doi.org/10.1136/vr.m3411> ●

“
You will be remembered as the prime minister who presided over the greatest slaughter of a protected animal in living memory”