



Badger Cull Q&A – July 2011

What does the RSPCA think about the announcement that the government will go ahead with a badger cull as part of a package of measures to try and control bovine TB in cattle ?

We are absolutely devastated and feel that today is a black day for badgers. The Society has battled against various plans put forward, and previously dismissed, by different governments. This is the announcement we have long been dreading.

Why is the RSPCA against this cull?

The RSPCA has long been firmly opposed to any plans for a widespread cull.

It believes the best scientific evidence indicates that a cull would be of little help in reducing bovine TB in cattle in the long term, and could actually make things worse rather than better in some areas through a process called perturbation.

There are also severe welfare concerns. The plans mooted could mean at least 70% of badgers, many of them healthy, being removed from large areas of the countryside which would equal a virtual elimination of the species. This is unacceptable.

We think the government has taken the wrong fork in the road with this policy, which is full of risks and will contribute little or nothing to eradicating TB nationally. Instead it will wipe out huge numbers of this much-loved species, including many animals which are healthy.

The RSPCA claims its view is based on clear and comprehensive science, but the government and groups in favour of a cull say the same thing. There seems to be lots of different science reports out there. Why is yours better than that of others?

We believe that the Independent Scientific Group on cattle TB (ISG), which published its final report in 2007, provides the most robust scientific evidence to date. It was the result of painstaking research over nearly ten years, cost the lives of about 11,000 badgers and cost taxpayers £50 million. It concluded that killing badgers could actually increase the spread of bTB in the area around the cull, making matters worse rather than better – a process called perturbation. It said, “badger culling can make no meaningful contribution to cattle TB control in Britain”

http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/diseases/atoz/tb/isg/report/final_report.pdf

Recent evidence said that bTB is endemic in over 39,000 km² of England.

What do you say to the argument that the RSPCA is basing its position on whimsical sentiment rather the hard realities involved with the farmer's plight?

The society's position is science and ethics-based, not a sentimental response to Wind in the Willows.

But what about the problems of bovine TB in cattle? What is to be done about that?

The RSPCA is sympathetic to farmers struggling to cope with the effects of this crippling disease and agrees that action is needed to combat it – but does not think action is synonymous with culling.

Vaccination of badgers, increased levels of testing, improved biosecurity and stricter controls on the movement of cattle are more effective ways of dealing with the problem in the long-term and eradicating bovine TB in cattle for good.



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What happened to plans for vaccination?

We were extremely dismayed last year when the government announced it was only going to use the vaccine in a limited area of Gloucestershire, rather than six areas in Staffordshire, Herefordshire/Worcestershire and Devon as was originally planned.

We believe this is a very short-sighted policy as using this vaccine. Recent research has shown that vaccination of badgers significantly reduces the level of disease in badgers, without the culling-related risk of making the disease worse. This and increasing the level of cattle testing, improving biosecurity and imposing stricter controls on the movement of cattle are the ways most likely to find sustainable and effective solution to reducing the incidence of bovine TB.

If these projects had gone ahead as planned, we would by now have been further along the road of finding such a solution. Instead it is a year on and nothing has been done – and it will be at least another year before this package of measures will be implemented.

What will the RSPCA do next? Will it appeal a decision to go ahead with a badger cull with a judicial review?

The RSPCA is considering all options.

What does the RSPCA think about the methods to be used?

The society was extremely concerned about the methods set out in the proposals and agrees that they were “scientifically among the worst options they could have chosen” – as stated by Dr Rosie Woodroffe, a badger ecologist who worked on the ISG.

Defra proposed an untested culling method (shooting) via an untested delivery method (licensed farmers and landowners). No-one knows whether these methods will work because they were not tested in the ISG 10-year trial – instead the trials used methods of trapping then a shooting – a more expensive method in the short term but with fewer risks.

Using these untested methods also makes it difficult to ensure that the culling is co-ordinated and maintained over a large area for at least four years. According to the ISG trial, this consistency is necessary to avoid making the incidence of the disease worse through ‘perturbation’ – or badgers moving from the cull area and so spreading bovine TB over a wider area.

What are the problems involved with free-shooting? If a cull has to go ahead, would the RSPCA prefer cage-trapping to free-shooting?

The RSPCA is opposed to all plans for a widespread cull. If one is to be carried out, we believe it should be done in the most humane way possible.

There are far more risks involved with free-shooting than cage-trapping. Because of their anatomy it is potentially more difficult to free-shoot a badger in a quick humane way than, say a fox or a deer. This means there is a high risk of wounding the badgers instead of killing them, and causing a slow, painful death.

In order to free-shoot a badger in a quick, humane way, there are two 'lethal' points which would need to be successfully hit. The first is the head - not only a small target but it has a thick, bony skull - which leaves a small margin for error.



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The second is the heart, which is located back in the body in an unlikely spot only those with advanced anatomical knowledge would be able to know. Also, badgers move in such a way that their elbow joint is normally in front of the heart.

Also, Badgers have very thick skin, and depending on the time of year, often a very thick layer of fat; they are 'low slung' - so difficult to aim for and see; and nocturnal, so would need to be shot at night with lights - making the issues even more difficult.

What does the RSPCA think of the use of farmers and landowners to carry out the cull?

The RSPCA believes that devolving power to farmers or non-statutory bodies could make the issues involved with culling badgers worse.

It will be very difficult to monitor how the cull is being carried out, and ensure the conditions are being met to reduce risk of making the incidence of the disease worse through 'perturbation' – or badgers moving from the cull area and so spreading bovine TB over a wider area.

It could also end up being very expensive for the farmers. According to Defra's own impact assessment, it could end up costing farmers more than an outbreak of bovine TB on their farm would. The consultation document admitted that farmers could be left with a net cost, which means that the process would ultimately cost them rather than save them money. Some farmers could end up spending more money over a four-year period than an incident of bovine TB might cost them.