

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Animal and plant health, HC 611

Tuesday 16 December 2025

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Members present: Mr Alistair Carmichael (Chair); Sarah Bool; Juliet Campbell; Charlie Dewhurst; Sarah Dyke; Terry Jermy; Jayne Kirkham; Josh Newbury; Jenny Riddell-Carpenter; Henry Tufnell.

Questions 563 - 583

Witnesses

I: Dame Angela Eagle MP, Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, DEFRA; Emily Miles, Director General for Food, Biosecurity and Trade, DEFRA; Mike Rowe, Director for Farming and Countryside, DEFRA.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [DEFRA](#)
- [DEFRA](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dame Angela Eagle, Emily Miles and Mike Rowe.

Chair: We are going to move on to questions on animal and plant health. Henry is going to lead some questioning on precision breeding.

Q563 **Henry Tufnell:** Minister, you might not be able to answer these questions, because it is fundamentally in the Paymaster General's gift and he has not been before us to give evidence, but the previous Secretary of State told the Committee that they would seek an exemption from dynamic alignment in respect of precision breeding. Is that still the intention?

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes.

Q564 **Henry Tufnell:** Thank you. Can I ask about divergence? The Committee has heard extensively in respect of the complications around food and feed from authorised PBOs. If they are developed in England, they can be sold in England and Wales, but they cannot be grown or processed there. That becomes a legalistic framework. In the spirit of simplification that you have set out throughout your evidence to the Committee, can I ask what work you are doing with the Welsh and Scottish Governments and the Northern Ireland Administration to reduce this divergence and to enable it to be more streamlined and simplified?

Dame Angela Eagle: As a matter of course, these issues are devolved. We have to respect devolved issues and that the devolved Administrations may take a different approach and attitude to this. It can sometimes create complications, but the advantage is in devolution itself. Emily, I do not know whether you want to come in.

Emily Miles: I may have made this point before, so apologies if I am repeating myself—

Henry Tufnell: You have.

Emily Miles: We use a frameworks approach at official level with the devolved Administrations.

Q565 **Henry Tufnell:** I apologise for taking the time, but it is important. We had evidence from Geoff Ogle. I am just going to read this out to give you an idea; you might have heard this before: "Let us take a precision-bred tomato. If the precision-bred tomato is produced in England, it can be sold in Scotland. If the precision-bred tomato is used to make a lasagne in England, it could be sold in Scotland. If a producer in Scotland bought a precision-bred tomato, they could not sell it in Scotland. If they turned it into a lasagne, they could not sell it in Scotland, but they could sell it in England".

It becomes mind-bogglingly complicated. You effectively get asked to get legal advice. I just wanted to put that on your radar and read it into the record.



Dame Angela Eagle: Fair enough.

Q566 **Henry Tufnell:** Do you support the precision breeding regulations being extended to include animals, as stated in the precision breeding Act?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are not there yet. We commenced the plant precision breeding regulations in early November, but we are not near to doing the animal ones yet. I do not have anything against it in principle, but we are still not in a situation where we know whether we have an exemption. The EU is moving in a similar position, by the way, on how it is looking at this kind of issue. Done properly, precision breeding has real benefits both in resilience for animals and plants, and in creating the tomato that you were just talking about, which might have higher vitamin D content, for example. It is all a bit uncertain at the moment, but in general, yes.

Q567 **Henry Tufnell:** So the EU is not considering animals as part of its policy.

Dame Angela Eagle: My understanding is that it is considering how it may move its structures forwards to allow for precision breeding. It has not got anywhere near a regulation on this yet, but the indications are that it is moving in a similar direction to the one that we have already moved in.

Q568 **Henry Tufnell:** Do you have a timeline for when secondary legislation will be brought through in respect of animals?

Dame Angela Eagle: No. It is important that we get the SPS stuff under way and see what the requirements are and whether we can get an exception.

Q569 **Chair:** In respect of Henry's tomato, which is probably now one of the most famous pieces of fruit that this Committee will ever consider, all that is really required is good relations and working relationships between the Administrations.

Dame Angela Eagle: We try to foster those, with greater success in some contexts than others.

Chair: Well, good luck with that one.

Q570 **Josh Newbury:** Minister, I am sure it will come as no surprise that I will start with avian influenza. As we know, human flu is making life difficult at the moment, but it is fair to say that avian influenza is causing absolute misery for poultry farmers up and down the country. We have heard of whole turkey farms being knocked out by it just before Christmas, with imports having to fill the gap. As far as the taxpayer is concerned, the last three avian flu outbreak seasons have cost upwards of £126 million. We have warnings that this year's variant is highly pathogenic. What is your long-term strategy to tackle these annual outbreaks?



Dame Angela Eagle: Avian flu is now endemic in the wild bird population, which means we are getting waves. There is a kind of yo-yo effect. If you look at the costs for the last five years—it sounds like you have, since you have added them together—you will see that in 2022 it was around what it is now, and then there was a huge increase in 2022-23, a fall and then a rise. You are getting a kind of yo-yo effect. That is why my colleague Baroness Hayman promulgated the housing regulations early, so that we could try to protect from the effects of it. That is why the whole country is sort of now an outbreak zone.

You are right about the costs. There is a bird flu vaccination taskforce, which produced its initial report in July 2025. Again, part of the trouble is what you can do with vaccinated birds and whether you can trade them. The French vaccinated all their ducks and there have already been outbreaks of avian influenza in the ducks that were vaccinated. It does not stop the spread. It is not necessarily the answer.

Q571 **Josh Newbury:** On that recommendation that we expect might come from the taskforce around the vaccination of turkey, geese and ducks, even though it is not the silver bullet that we hope it would be, would you be minded to implement that recommendation, should it come?

Dame Angela Eagle: It makes sense to think about how vaccination for turkeys, which is a very high-value area, might work. As I have just said with the French ducks example, it is not an absolute answer to the issue. We are happy to trial it and see whether it works and what the consequences of vaccinating a flock actually are.

Emily Miles: We would need to make sure that there was no impact on consumer health and that it enabled trade. We would need international recognition. We are keen to pursue the trials and then see whether we can resolve those issues.

Q572 **Josh Newbury:** Do you have an indication of what the timescales might be around that? When might the trials commence? When might you have the outcomes?

Emily Miles: The trials are under way. I do not have a timescale. We are very conscious that avian influenza has a significant financial implication for the industry and the taxpayer. We are keen to explore what we can do to mitigate that.

Q573 **Josh Newbury:** Let me move on to bovine tuberculosis. Last month, the Committee had the chance to visit Gatcombe farm in Devon, which is famed for its trials of new strategies for on-farm management of TB. We were told that the only tests that farmers are legally able to conduct for BTB result in many false negatives. In other words, TB is carrying on spreading in herds even if they are declared TB-free. That means longer outbreaks, more cattle being slaughtered and all the things that we do not want to see. Is that a situation that concerns you? What is the Department doing to try to move us beyond this?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dame Angela Eagle: There are various things that are happening, but the test that you are talking about—the SICCT test—is the internationally recognised test. Bovine TB is a notifiable disease, so we have to use that test.

Professor Godfray's final report on bovine TB eradication was published in September this year. The new APHA tests are accompanied by DIVA tests as well so that you can distinguish between cattle that have the disease and those who have been vaccinated. That is the issue. We are anxious to see what we can do to proceed with that. We are at the third field trial stage for some of these more sensitive vaccines, but at the moment we are not in a position where we can deploy them.

We are open-minded about other tests, but we have to carry on with that test at the moment, simply because that is the internationally recognised one, while we are doing lots of work to develop a more effective one that could then be recognised. It is no good vaccinating all the cattle if you cannot sell them.

Q574 Josh Newbury: Yes, absolutely. It is a complicated picture, isn't it? There are loads of things that you have to consider, but our concern is to make sure that we are moving in the right direction on all fronts.

One thing that we discussed at Gatcombe is that farmers can only carry out certain tests for TB if they are classified as being in an outbreak. If they get TB-free status, they are breaking the law if they test their herd. They are essentially blind from that point on. Many of them see a breakdown and future outbreaks, which is massively concerning. They feel like they are trapped in that cycle.

Robert Reed at Gatcombe and many farmers like him want, in his words, to take control of TB so that they do not get these repeated outbreaks, which have a massive cost to the taxpayer as well. Will you look at this with a view to potentially changing this regulation—it seems quite nonsensical to me—and allowing farmers on officially TB-free farms to test so that they can retain that status?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are looking in the TB refresh at what we can do around all these issues to see how we can be more sophisticated, especially given that the vast majority of badger culls are coming to an end.

Q575 Josh Newbury: At Gatcombe, they have pioneered a few different tests that were more accurate, particularly in picking up the animals that were shedding TB, which we know is the real worrying sign, because they are actively spreading. As far as the APHA is concerned, an animal is clear if the skin test has come up negative, but they found that the vast majority of their negatives were carrying TB and many were shedding it. Are the tests that they are carrying out being looked at by the Department? Are you considering that evidence and looking at whether this could be used more widely?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Emily Miles: The foundational test is the SICCT one, which is the internationally recognised one. That is very specific, but one in four or five cattle will be infected but not recognised. We understand that there is an issue with accuracy. That is supplemented by the gamma testing, which we think is a useful supplementary test.

We also agree that there should be an expansion of ancillary and private tests. As part of the TB refresh on the strategy, we want to look at how we might do that. However, we need to make sure that the testing is scientifically acceptable. That will be confirmed by the evidence. We have no ideological objection to expanding the types of testing; we just need to make sure that we are doing that in a scientifically informed way.

Q576 **Josh Newbury:** Can you understand why many in the livestock farming sector feel that there is an ideological approach to this, given that they are banned from carrying out tests that they pay for on their own herd in order to try to manage it?

Emily Miles: We need to look at it. I completely agree with the idea of farmers taking responsibility for TB. That would make a huge difference.

Dame Angela Eagle: It would, as well as biosecurity and trading from high infected areas into low infected areas. There is a range of issues that you can look at in this area.

Q577 **Josh Newbury:** I really hope that can be looked at quite swiftly because that would start to make a difference, not for every farm—some could not afford it—but for those who want to manage it on farm themselves and not have to keep going out to the taxpayer for compensation for slaughtered animals, which carries a cost to them as well even though they do get the compensation.

We still have the ambition for England to reach TB-free status by 2038. Are we on track to achieve that?

Dame Angela Eagle: The Godfray report was very clear about that. We will not get there at the rate that we are going. He said we need to spend more money on it. The refresh will be an important part of seeing how we can bear down on this in different ways. Farmer management on farm is an important aspect of this, as is badger vaccination and some of the scientific developments that we are trying to prove with vaccination.

TB is a very difficult, very clever little organism that hides in the white blood cells. Even if an animal is infected, it is very difficult to get a handle on whether it is or not, which is why scientists are struggling in the way that they are. We are doing our best to make some progress in this very difficult area.

Q578 **Josh Newbury:** Absolutely. The infection has to be really severe before an animal shows any symptoms, doesn't it? In fact, we have heard about bulls that are slaughtered and nobody had any idea that they had TB, but when they look at the carcase, they are absolutely riddled with it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

You mentioned the refresh. We are expecting a new BTB strategy in the spring. Will that include any major policy changes in terms of the on-herd diagnostics that we have been talking about or management on farm? Is that going to be part of it?

Dame Angela Eagle: I have not seen any draft of it at the moment. We are looking to bear down on all these areas. You have the Godfray report in front of you. You can see which direction the professor thinks we should be going in. Some of our constraints are scientific; some of them involve trade and the trade-offs between vaccination and whether one can trade animals. I hope we will be able to make some progress and some suggestions for getting to a TB-free herd by that deadline.

Q579 **Josh Newbury:** I am getting the sense that, because of the ongoing trials, you will struggle to give us a timescale on when you think a commercially available vaccine might be on the market.

Dame Angela Eagle: It has to be trialled and accepted. It has to be proved scientifically before we can make it commercially available or think about how to deploy it. We are in third-stage trials, but there was a slightly odd result in the second stage, which was unexplainable, that might have set us back a while. This is the science. You can go only as far as that goes when it gives you a direction that you can go in.

Q580 **Josh Newbury:** Just finally, we have talked quite a lot this morning about the SPS agreement and how that might mean we have to hold back on some things that we might like to make progress on, because we need to see what the outcomes of that are. Will that affect the work on a BTB vaccine?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is a capacity issue in the Department and not an issue of negotiation with the EU, to be very frank with you.

Q581 **Sarah Dyke:** One key thing that I have heard over and over is that the IT systems in the APHA, BCMS and LIS do not talk to each other. What consideration have you given to creating one master system database that will help improve tracking?

Dame Angela Eagle: I might be very sceptical of somebody who said I could have one master database that would solve all my IT problems.

Sarah Dyke: But specifically on bovine TB?

Chair: That sounds like a good argument against digital ID, but that is another story for another day.

Dame Angela Eagle: Well, Apple already has that, but not when it comes to cows.

Emily Miles: We are far behind where we need to be in terms of cattle movement monitoring, which is very paper-based at the moment. It requires a lot of manual input at the Rural Payments Agency, which runs the scheme.



Dame Angela Eagle: There are lots of phone calls, believe it or not.

Emily Miles: The livestock information transformation programme is a part of improving that situation. We expect the cattle element to come online in the summer of next year, although we need to do a statutory instrument first to mandate the particular use of ear tags so that it will get used.

Once we have that up and running, which should be reasonably soon, it will make a substantial difference to our ability to do traceability of that particular species. That in turn should help the APHA have a more efficient system. It will need to then adjust its IT to dock into the livestock information transformation system. It is in hand.

Over the three years of the spending review, the APHA is expected to bring in some new digital tools that will make it more efficient. It has started, for instance, by trying to give iPads to inspectors. It started with its bee inspectors and is moving on to some of its other inspectors. There is quite a lot that it is doing, which should make a difference, but some considerable progress is needed.

Dame Angela Eagle: Out of the hundreds of SIs that I am expected to do in the next few months, that is one that I am particularly looking forward to.

Sarah Dyke: Excellent, thank you very much.

Q582 **Chair:** Since you mentioned cattle movements, Emily, please can we devise a system whereby we are using either high-frequency or low-frequency readers in both Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom? It is madness that we would not have a single system in a single market.

Dame Angela Eagle: That is devolution for you.

Chair: Yes, and co-operation between Governments within it. Go on—make my Christmas.

Emily Miles: I cannot tell Scotland which ear tag to use, sadly.

Chair: You are going to go ahead with a different system.

Emily Miles: We will go ahead with one that is in line with what the EU does.

Chair: Then, in 10 years' time, you will go to a high-frequency system.

Dame Angela Eagle: The system that we have chosen is in line with the EU system. We do not want to have to do something different and then have to change it again.

Q583 **Sarah Dyke:** I have heard from many farmers, my brother being one of them, that the compensation rate of £2,000 per slaughtered cow does



HOUSE OF COMMONS

not even cover the financial cost of the disruption to their business. Milk prices are being cut. With the compensation being deemed inefficient, Minister, will you look at perhaps conducting a review into the adequacy of compensation payments?

Dame Angela Eagle: If you are asking me to increase the compensation payments because they are not adequate, I hear what you are saying, but I would rather get to the stage where we can do some prevention. I would rather spend Government money on sorting out prevention than increase compensation. Short of the general reviews of these things that we always do, I suspect that the answer is that it is not my priority.

Chair: I am going to suspend the session very briefly so that we can have a change in your supporting cast, Minister, and then we will move on to questions around fisheries.