

The Rt Hon Mr. Alistair Carmichael,
House of Commons,
Palace of Westminster,
London SW1A 0AA

12th March 2025 - by email

Bovine tuberculosis control in cattle herds – proposed examination of epidemic control

Dear Mr. Carmichael,

I am writing to you, having raised this most urgent issue last year with my MP Jenny Ridell-Carpenter here in Suffolk Coastal, and following a useful on-farm visit with her and communications and a meeting in recent days with the EFRAC Agriculture Specialist.

As an independent scientist who has worked as a professional ecological consultant for government, industry and private bodies for over 30 years, I have broad experience of animal management, science and epidemiology, and legal matters in the UK. Also, as a farmstead owner for 32 years, growing small volumes of hay for livestock.

Because of my scientific expertise I became involved in 2015 reviewing the science around this disease for NGO bodies. Disturbing findings since then have resulted in the formation of an extended independent research group, and efforts both legally and scientifically to try to improve the situation. We have published papers in leading veterinary and science journals since 2019.

An epidemic of bovine tuberculosis in cattle, which expanded with the distribution of untested infected stock after the 'Foot and Mouth' Disease epidemic in 2001, finally peaked around 2015 but is still highly prevalent across the west of England. Government strategy is to "eradicate" bovine TB by 2038, with 99.8% of cattle herds being Officially TB -Free (OTF) for at least six years. Since 2010 the gradual introduction of tighter testing measures has halved the number of more advanced cases, many with visible tuberculous lesions at slaughter. Test 'reactor' cattle result in herds being withdrawn from movements (becoming OTFW) until tested clear. However, reactors with earlier or less developed disease may survive further testing, and after suspension (OTFS) go on to reinfect a herd, or to infect a new herd, if traded.

Continued/.

Statutory regulations prohibit regular use of new generation tests between tuberculin (SICCT) and Gamma testing. The control of testing relates also to taxpayer compensation that is paid to farmers for reactors slaughtered. Over £1 Billion has been paid in compensation since 2014 with public costs running at over £100 Mn p.a.

In November last year Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle hosted a meeting to investigate this matter and a scientific symposium in Oxford that Defra and AHPA declined to attend. It is my view and that of a growing number of associates that not only have mistakes been made and compounded in Defra and APHA, but that there is a refusal or reluctance at best to introduce changes that could bring huge public good and far more rapidly that public information suggests. I am attaching some further information and have further material to share, as necessary moving forwards.

As you may be aware this is a key issue in many rural parishes, with farm costs and losses estimated anywhere between two- to three-times public purse payments. Herds withdrawn from movement for 3-6 months or longer require bought-in feed and the impact on businesses is crippling as well as taking a heavy toll on the well-being of farm families, their mental health. Ultimately, with continued farm closures, the security of rural survival in an increasingly intensified and financially challenging way of life. There are also considerable domestic and wild animal welfare implications.

I do hope that you will be able to take this matter forward with some urgency as there is little hope that any Government review will deliver. This subject might suit initially a roundtable to develop full clarity over the areas needing attention and prior to any oral/written public process. I have not listed less senior Government staff on the attached paper but would be happy to do so should this be necessary.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Langton FRSB, C Biol., BSc. Ecol,

INITIAL EVIDENCE STATEMENT TO ACCOMPANY LETTER

Bovine tuberculosis control – proposed examination of epidemic control

As bovine TB in cattle has spread east and north since 2012 control targets (to be reached by 2025) from the 2014 strategy for the 'Edge Area' (central and n.w. counties) have been missed. £1 Billion of public funds have been spent since 2014 and indications are that a further £1 Billion of public funds may be required over the next decade without a major shift in the way that Defra and the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) manage the disease.

The research background to disease control has developed in recent decades with elements of historic confusion and uncertainty over how the disease is spread and best controlled. Growth of herd size, especially for larger indoor dairy farms, is a contributing factor with some estimates of very high levels of infection, especially in the High Risk Area counties of southwest England. As herds get bigger and fewer, they are more difficult to get Officially TB -Free (OTF). Devon, Dorset, and Cornwall generate over one third of all bovine TB incidents in England. This means getting to only 16 non-OTF herds by 2038, down from over 600 today, with little change over the past five years there is no end in sight.

Resolving the issue is a challenge across Ireland and in Wales sustained progress has been made without wildlife intervention. In England badger culls have killed in the region of 250,000 badgers by trapping and shooting since 2013, with the policy being phased out from 2020 and to end in January 2026 other than in a few locations where culls may not complete until 2029. Despite media speculation, it has not been possible to directly relate badger removal scientifically with any reduction in bovine TB in cattle since 2013.

New 'Fresh Start' proposals discussed by an independent meeting of Peers and MPs to revise approaches to bovine TB control were put forward in November 2024. All the new Government has announced is intention to develop a new strategy with a review that will report in June 2025. However current measures announced in August 2024 relate mainly to surveillance of wild animals and not control of testing and trading of cattle where the main issues remain.

How the policy has failed to meet targets, and what new measures are needed, requires independent investigation. Claims of 'tribal' behaviour, bunker mentality, confirmation bias and reluctance to listen to contrary hypotheses and meet with key scientists, have been levied towards Government staff and Ministers, as well as a lack of research to explore alternative approaches.

Lines of Enquiries (provisional)

PUBLIC HEALTH

How dangerous is bovine TB to public health with infection from meat and pasteurised milk non-existent?

Does public expenditure warrant such heavy continuous public finance any more?

BTB CONTROL

What are the uncertainties in bovine TB disease and infection?

Why is it a 25-year eradication programme?

Why are the bTB targets being missed?

Is passed criticism of Government handling of livestock disease warranted?

BTB TESTING

How effective is the tuberculin test and why is it not working as it did in the 1960s?

How well does the additional Gamma test detect remaining infected cattle?

What are the new generation enhanced tests and why haven't they been applied widely?

How have considerations of 'inconclusive' or 'doubtful' reactors changed since 2018?

What has discovered at Gatcombe farm in Devon by Robert Reed and others since 2015?

GENERAL EFFICACY AND POLICY

How well does the Enferplex test work with Camelids?

Has the National Farmers Union had a disproportionate influence on policy within Defra?

How much public funding has been spent to-date /could be saved revised approaches?

How might Defra/APHA operational performance be improved?