

Written Response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Climate Change and Rural Affairs Committee entitled Report on the Welsh Government's Refreshed TB Eradication programme.

20 June 2017

One of the long-term goals of the Welsh Government is to eradicate bovine TB from Wales and the TB Eradication Programme leads this work. It aims to minimise the associated animal welfare, social, economic and environmental impacts on farm businesses and the wider rural community, as well as safeguarding public health. This Programme applies the sustainable development principle that prevention is better than cure, contributing to the profitability of the livestock industry.

The TB Eradication Programme was established in 2008 and the progress made to date has been promising with the number of new TB incidents at a 12 year low and over 95% of herds TB free.

Our approach to disease eradication must continue to concentrate on all sources of TB infection, including cattle-to-cattle, wildlife and other non-bovine species.

The Programme contains comprehensive and coherent measures set out in a delivery plan that is adaptable and flexible to changes in the bovine TB picture in Wales.

Building on our success to date, we consulted on measures to be applied on a regional approach to tackling Bovine TB in Wales last autumn. Full consideration has been given to the consultation responses and I will be making a statement on the delivery plan going forward later today.

I would like to thank the members of the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee for their report on our TB Eradication Programme. I am particularly pleased to see that the Committee's recommendations are in line with our proposals. I have set out my response to the Report's individual recommendations below.

Detailed Responses to the report's recommendations are set out below:

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Welsh Government should set a national target date for Wales to be officially TB free and provide clarity on the process for achieving this.

Recommendation 2

The Welsh Government should set interim targets for the eradication of the disease in each of the three TB regions – high, medium and low.

Response to recommendations 1 and 2: Accept

Informed by the work of the epidemiology team, Wales can be divided into three broad TB incidence categories which will allow us to tailor different disease control and prevention methods by region. Our immediate goals are to sustain and build upon the recent progress that has been made. This includes preserving the low levels of disease in the Low TB Area, driving down both incidence and prevalence in the Intermediate and High TB Areas and reducing the number of persistent breakdowns.

Work is underway to produce a formal eradication target as well as interim milestones for Wales as a whole and on a regional basis. We expect to be able to report on this by December 2017.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 3

The Welsh Government should carry out more research into the possible risks of spreading TB from larger herd sizes and slurry management practices. Being able to include advice on both of these issues in guidance from the Welsh Government would enhance the support offered to farmers in dealing with this disease.

Response: Accept

The TB Research and Development Programme is administered by Defra on behalf of GB. My officials represent the Welsh Government on the relevant research boards and groups that consider research and development priorities.

Previous work in assessing risk factors has identified a higher risk of TB infection for larger herds (which tend to be dairy herds), and I agree there is a need for better understanding of the factors that lead to this greater risk of TB infection in large herds. A proposal to study TB risk factors using uninfected cattle farms in England and Wales is currently being considered. Evidence gathered from these research areas will be used to update current advice to farmers.

We accept that TB spread via slurry is recognised as a potential risk. Research to provide evidence in this area is included in the GB Research and Development Plan for 17/18.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 4

The Welsh Government should maintain a watching brief and explore all options for an effective testing regime which is proportional to the risks identified.

Response: Accept

As stated above, the TB Research and Development Programme is administered by Defra on behalf of GB and my officials are fully engaged in this process on behalf of Wales. My officials will continue to maintain their watching brief on the latest scientific evidence for bovine TB testing. A number of TB tests (in addition to the skin and gamma tests) have been developed, however, none of these have currently achieved the same levels of specificity and sensitivity. We plan to continue applying tests in a proportionate way by using the complementary gamma interferon test in chronic herd breakdowns and high risk herds in the Low TB Area.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 5

The Welsh Government should engage industry as far as possible in the development of an online biosecurity package to ensure that Welsh farmers can develop farm-specific measures that will add value to its efforts to control and eradicate the disease.

Response: Accept

Building on earlier work, biosecurity featured in our recent consultation and there was a positive response from Industry to the plan of introducing an online biosecurity package. It is a key part of our eradication programme and we will be developing a standardised online package in the longer term to help farmers implement improved husbandry and biosecurity practices. In the short term to support the wider package we are in the process of developing a biosecurity app. The guidance on biosecurity standards will be developed and agreed with the industry.

Financial Implications There will be costs associated with the development of an online biosecurity package and app but these are unquantifiable at present

Recommendation 6

The Committee supports the Welsh Government's proposal to encourage Informed Purchasing, also known as Risk Based Trading. A system of Risk Based Trading should be taken forward voluntarily in the first instance with the industry and livestock markets. This should be kept under review and, if necessary, introduced on a mandatory basis.

Response: Accept

Risk Based Trading schemes in New Zealand and Australia have greatly contributed to TB eradication and we have already offered grant funding to livestock markets to allow them to update equipment to display TB information. I also encourage farmers to sign up to a Cattle Health Certification Standards (CHeCS) TB scheme as this will help buyers minimize the risk of introducing disease to their herd and herds classified as the lowest risk will be exempt from some of our cattle controls. These voluntary approaches will be kept under review. In the long-term it is likely only the introduction of a mandatory system will ensure that TB information is provided at the point of sale. We are therefore exploring ways this can be introduced.

Financial Implications – It is not yet possible to quantify cost. This is a longer term goal of the TB Eradication Programme and we do not know what a mandatory system will need to include e.g. enhanced IT systems etc.

Recommendation 7

The Welsh Government's proposals to introduce targeted badger removal in cases of chronic breakdown herds must be scientifically monitored and reviewed and either adapted or stopped if it is shown that it does not prevent the transmission of Bovine TB from wildlife to cattle. Any measures taken on a trial basis must include hard borders and adequate safeguards against the risk of any possible perturbation of the wildlife population.

Response: Accept in principle

A targeted badger removal programme is one of a range of enhanced measures being developed with vets, epidemiologists and wildlife experts. Scientific monitoring will be a critical element. I agree that the programme must be subject to review as and when necessary. Our intention is that badger removal will be undertaken at farm level only. Evidence from previous approaches (RBCT for example) suggests perturbation risks. As a delivery policy, this approach of small scale badger removal has not been undertaken before but it is unlikely that we will find a location that will be protected by hard borders. The risk of any possible perturbation cannot be quantified but will be monitored closely and mitigated against as far as possible.

The expected availability of vaccine in 2018 could provide greater protection to the remaining badger population.

Financial Implications – Initially costs will be met from the existing programme budget. The level of intervention will be based on available funds, Welsh Government can decide the number and the extent to which enhanced measures are rolled out for these herds. A monthly progress review of Action Plans and associated costs is in place with APHA. Part of this process of monitoring and review will be to ensure the TB Programme Budget is not overspent at year end.

Recommendation 8

The Welsh Government should report to the Committee 12 months after the programme of targeted badger removal begins to present its findings. We expect the Welsh Government to make its data publicly available in order to ensure transparency in their decision-making and review processes.

Response: Accept

The badger removal programme will be closely monitored and we will publish reports on both the programme delivery and any impact on the disease picture on our website. These reports will also be presented to the Committee.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 9

The Welsh Government and Defra should ensure that the guidance which is in place to facilitate cross border liaison is robust, particularly in relation to the exercising of wildlife controls, including badger removal and culling. This guidance must be kept under review by the Welsh Government and Defra.

Response: Accept

I am confident that guidance in relation to cross border liaison is in place and is robust and that in the event of any badger removals close to the border by either government it will be adhered to. Officials from both governments have been and will continue to be in regular, close contact. To date there has been no licensed culling of badgers within 2 km of the Welsh border.

Financial Implications: None.

Recommendation 10

The Welsh Government should pay farmers a reasonable compensation sum for cattle slaughtered as part of the TB eradication programme. This sum should be kept under review, in consultation with stakeholders.

Response: Accept

Our compensation system is based on individual valuations at current market prices and our penalty system incentivises compliance and best practice. I will continue to review our compensation system, in consultation with stakeholders.

Financial Implications: Future reviews of the compensation system will have to take into account the loss of European Union funding which represents 15% of the TB eradication budget.

Recommendation 11

The Welsh Government must ensure that current funding received from the European Union for bovine TB testing and other measures will be guaranteed within future Welsh Government budgets

Response: Accept in principle

As I have made very clear in discussions with the UK Government, we expect them to make good on promises made during the referendum campaign that Wales would not lose a single penny as a result of the UK leaving the EU.

Financial Implications: The financial implications are currently unknown.

Recommendation 12

The Welsh Government must seek urgent assurances from the UK Government that the Bovine TB status of the UK will not affect continuing access to the EU Single Market.

Response: Accept

The Welsh Government will seek assurances from the UK Government that the Bovine TB status of the UK should not affect trade following our exit from the EU. Ultimately, this will come down to the detail of the trade deals that are negotiated and is another example of why it's vital for the Welsh Government to be fully engaged in that process.

Financial Implications: The financial implications are currently unknown.

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