

Editorial

A new approach needed to badger/TB problem

The announcement in 1982 that UK's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) had stopped gassing badgers to control the spread of bovine tuberculosis because it had been found to be inhumane was welcomed by many people. At that time the Consultative Panel on Badgers and Tuberculosis (on which FFPS is represented) recommended that live-trapping and humane killing would be an acceptable alternative to gassing, with the added benefit that the dead badgers would be available for research, which could lead to a greater understanding of the disease in badgers and could improve the chances of finding a better method of control.

These were the hopes. Two years later, on 18 October 1984, Wildlife Link's Badger Working Group published a report* questioning the effectiveness of MAFF's present badger elimination operations in controlling bovine tuberculosis. In the 'problem areas' in south-west England, where the level of TB in cattle is 5–10 times that in the rest of the country, MAFF's policy is to cage-trap and kill all badgers in the vicinity of any infected cattle herd, radiating outwards until a 'clean edge' is reached where the population is believed to be free from disease. Although the method of killing is different, the policy remains unchanged from the badger-gassing days and it is now being criticised because there is little evidence to show that the gassing of badger sets during the period 1975–82 reduced the incidence of TB in cattle in south-west England. MAFF says that live-trapping results in a more thorough eradication than gassing and may therefore be more effective in controlling the disease. But eliminating all the badgers in an area of infection could be making things worse because it involves removing some badgers that could have developed valuable disease immunity, whereas those that move into the area, after the six-month period during which MAFF prevents recolonisation, are likely to be more susceptible to the disease and this could lead to an increase in cross-infection to cattle.

A fresh approach is urged and to this end the report makes the following four major recommendations:

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- A limited amount of cage-trapping should continue until 1988, by which time there will be six years' data from which to evaluate how effective the eradication system has been in controlling the disease.

- MAFF should take advantage of the fact that some farmers like badgers on their land by establishing 'no badger interference' research zones around infected herds. Farmers in agreement with this new approach should be given research assistance grants in addition to the current 75 per cent compensation payment for all infected cattle. These zones would show whether or not leaving badgers undisturbed affects the incidence of bovine TB in badger populations and whether this influences the frequency of badger to cattle cross-infections. If, in the future, it is demonstrated that cage-trapping fails to reduce cattle disease and if also it is shown that a 'no badger interference' policy can contain the herd breakdown situation by maintaining cattle reactor levels at less than 0.1 per cent, MAFF perhaps should consider the latter as a long-term policy in managing the disease.

- MAFF should fund further research into the development of an oral vaccine to protect badgers from TB.

- MAFF and the voluntary wildlife organisations should jointly fund a Badger Conservation Liaison Officer, who would work in south-west England for a trial one-year period and attempt to improve liaison between farmers, MAFF, wildlife organisations and the general public.

The report, which is formally addressed to the Ministry's Bovine Tuberculosis Review Team, was produced after extensive consultation with many experts and specialists within and outside MAFF and should be studied seriously. It is hoped that MAFF will adopt a new policy, one that is acceptable to voluntary wildlife bodies and farmers alike, and that also respects the fact that badgers are protected by law and should not be killed unless it is absolutely unavoidable.

**Badgers, Cattle and Bovine Tuberculosis* is available from WWF, 11–13 Ockford Road, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1QU, price £3.50 including postage and packing.