



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT

Title: TB Eradication Programme

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By: Elin Jones, Minister for Rural Affairs

In April I announced a comprehensive package of measures as part of the bovine TB Eradication programme to deliver the One Wales programme of Government commitment to pursue vigorously a programme of TB eradication in Wales.

In line with my commitment to keep you informed on progress on the implementation of the TB Eradication Programme I have today published an update which can be viewed below.

TB Eradication Programme Update 23 September 2009

TB is an infectious disease which has devastating consequences for our rural communities. I can confirm that the number of cases of TB in cattle continues to rise; 4,600 cattle were slaughtered in Wales in the period January to May 2008 compared to 3200 in the same period in 2007 - an increase of 44%. From 1 April 2008 to 11 September 2008, expenditure on TB compensation was £10,077,985. In the same period during 2007, TB compensation expenditure reached £6,352,530. This is a difference of £3,725,455 and an increase of 59% in the financial year to date.

This acceleration in incidence is unacceptable and unsustainable. It is further justification that we need to act quickly to turn the tide on the spread of this disease and underlines the necessity of the One Wales Programme for

Government commitment to pursue vigorously a programme of TB eradication in Wales, backed by an additional £27.7m over three years from April 2008. This commitment recognises that action needs to be taken to protect the health and welfare of our livestock and wildlife populations, safeguard the future of the dairy and beef industry in Wales and to address the escalating compensation costs to the public purse. Our dairy and beef industry play a valuable role in contributing to the sustainability of our rural communities. It is imperative that our farmers are able to have the confidence to continue investing in their businesses.

Current TB policy is partially driven by a European Union legal framework which requires each Member State to develop an eradication programme as appropriate in order to “accelerate, intensify or carry through” the eradication of the disease.

In April I announced a comprehensive package of measures as part of the TB Eradication Programme in order to tackle this disease head on. There is no single solution to TB. The approach to eradicate this disease has to be comprehensive, practical and proportionate taking all factors into account. There is no point tackling one source of infection and ignoring another. This would only allow the infection to return. Animals other than cattle are susceptible to TB. Previous studies have concluded that wildlife, in particular, badgers, are a reservoir of TB infection in Great Britain and that they are involved in the transmission of infection to cattle and vice versa. The results of the Wales Badger Found Dead Survey in 2006 are consistent with this.

It is difficult to recognise the symptoms of TB, given the length of time before the disease shows clinical signs. As a result the disease can go undetected for a considerable period in a herd. It is difficult to fight a disease when the full scale of it is unknown. Government alone cannot defeat this disease. It must be a joint effort with farmers, vets and all those with an interest in our countryside taking responsibility and contributing to the effort, however hard that journey may be at times I believe that it will be worth it to achieve a healthy livestock and a healthy wildlife population in Wales.

The programme structure provides an effective and visible mechanism by which the Welsh Assembly Government can make fully informed decisions based on appropriate consultation. This work is overseen by the TB Eradication Programme Board, and comment and advice from the Technical Advisory Group and the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy Steering Group, acting here as a stakeholder group.

I gave a commitment to keep you updated on progress on the implementation of the TB Eradication Programme. I am therefore pleased to inform you of a number of developments including the launch of two new initiatives to combat this disease, firstly a TB Health Check of all cattle herds in Wales and secondly, the establishment of 3 Regional Eradication Delivery Boards.

TB Health Check Wales

As I reported in April the key step for the first year of the TB eradication Programme is a broad review of Cattle Surveillance and Control procedures. A central part of this review will involve an additional one-off test of all cattle herds across Wales to identify the extent of the infection and to remove diseased cattle at an earlier stage in order to reduce the risk of infection spreading. I am pleased to announce that the TB Health Check Wales will begin on 1 October 2008 and letters and TB eradication booklets have been sent to farmers across Wales informing them of this initiative.

This is a considerable piece of work and demonstrates a significant commitment by the Welsh Assembly Government, veterinary practitioners and farmers. It will require an additional 3,500 herds to be tested in a period of 15 months completing on 31 December 2009; in effect this means that in 15 months we will be testing herds that would have normally taken 4 years to test.

I welcome the positive approach taken by vets and farmers to the initiative. A veterinary capacity survey was commissioned in preparation for the TB Health Check Wales and undertaken by the Wales Rural Observatory. 82.9% of veterinary practices in Wales responded to the survey. The vast majority of veterinary practices responded positively stating that they believe the TB Health Check Wales is a worthwhile exercise. 86% of the veterinary practices that responded believed they could meet this increased demand in testing. My officials are working closely with Animal Health to assist veterinary practices to ensure we test all our herds in the 15 month timeframe of the TB Health Check Wales.

The additional costs associated with the TB Health Check Wales (testing and other veterinary costs) will be paid for by the Welsh Assembly Government. Organising the cattle for testing and other on farm costs will be the responsibility of the herd keeper. To minimise the impact on farmers and vets the testing period includes one whole Winter season and part of another as this is when animals are housed indoors and are easier to gather for testing. Herds already scheduled to be tested in this window will not be tested twice, their scheduled test will count as part of the TB Health Check Wales. All herds in Wales will be tested during this period with no exemptions. This includes previously exempt herds, not currently routinely tested, such as beef fattening and finishing units. In line with our whole herd approach all animals over the age of 42 days will be tested. Where herd tests are not completed by the due date herds will be placed under movement restrictions in line with our zero tolerance policy. This recognises the collective responsibility farmers must share in tackling this disease.

If disease is identified normal procedures for disease management and restrictions will be put in place by the local Animal Health Office. Herd keepers will have already received their Parish Testing Interval (PTI) notice for 2008 from Animal Health informing them of their herd testing frequency. Parish Testing Interval will continue to be reviewed on an annual basis and will be

influenced by the results of the TB Health Check Wales. Pre-Movement Testing will continue for animals moving from one and two yearly testing herds (in line with the PTI and herd status set for that herd by Animal Health) subject to exemptions. Disease picked up through the TB Health Check Wales may affect the testing interval of individual herds and parish/areas. The Gamma Interferon test will continue to be deployed under set conditions as per existing policy.

In doing this work it is possible that we will see an increase in the number of cattle testing positive for TB as we will be testing more cattle than ever before. In the short term we therefore expect further increases in compensation costs. By identifying disease earlier and removing reactors more quickly we have a real opportunity to start to get ahead of the disease. The TB Health Check will provide crucial evidence for future decisions in setting appropriate testing regimes and changes to movement controls in order to ensure that we eradicate TB, and, in addition to that, and just as importantly, that we do everything possible to keep those areas of Wales that are currently clean free from TB in the future.

Reactor Removal

Another significant development is that my officials have been working closely with Animal Health as a matter of priority to reduce reactor removal time. Each office in Wales must meet the current 20 day target for the removal of reactors and put in place an action plan when this is not the case. There has been a 44% increase in the number of reactors this year in comparison with the same period last year. This has placed significant pressure on the resources of Animal Health particularly in the Carmarthen Divisional Office Area where there is a high incidence of TB. Animal Health has worked quickly to revise their reactor removal procedures and in Carmarthen they have recruited additional staff to increase administration, valuation and slaughter capacity consequently reducing their reactor removal times. Infected cattle must be taken off farm as quickly as possible so that they do not spread disease to other cattle on the farm, or spread disease to wildlife on that farm. I believe the Regional TB Eradication Delivery Boards which I have established will be able to use their local knowledge to play a valuable role in ensuring the speedy removal of reactors from farms in Wales.

Regional TB Eradication Delivery Boards

I am also pleased to announce today that three new Regional TB Eradication Delivery Boards, initially Chaired by the relevant Divisional Veterinary Manager, and covering all of Wales have been established to ensure that delivery of policy is specific to regional and local conditions and that it is implemented effectively. The Regional TB Eradication Delivery Boards are meeting for the first time tomorrow, Wednesday 24 September 2008; their membership includes private veterinary practitioners, Animal Health, Local Authorities, the Welsh Assembly Government, auctioneers and farming industry representatives. Members of the Boards are expected to understand the TB picture in their area and be able to provide a local and practical

perspective that is aligned to making a difference for the region, whilst also recognising its importance for the eradication of TB in Wales.

The aim of the Regional TB Eradication Delivery Boards is to deliver a co-ordinated and concerted approach to eradicating TB from their region. Members are expected to already have a high level of involvement in the management of relevant activities and be able to have a formal input into their sector or organisation, or be in a position to influence that decision making process. They will play a hands on role ensuring an effective joined up response for the prevention, detection and removal of TB by bringing together local farmers, vets and delivery organisations to collaborate in developing and delivering practical solutions to local problems. Through their role, the Regional TB Eradication Delivery Boards will ensure that the work of Animal Health and the funds committed in Wales by the UK Government are aligned to meet the regional and national needs of Wales.

The priorities that each Board chooses to tackle will reflect the local situation, for example, epidemiology, other sources of infection, evidence of operational performance by delivery agents, as well as the national priorities set out by the Welsh Assembly Government. Additional financial support is available and can be considered within the national programme of activities or for a regional initiative. Each Regional TB Eradication Delivery Board will develop a programme of actions over time. Actions could include issues such as:

- Completion of the TB Health Check Wales testing.
- Collectively considering the removal of animals off farm.
- Identifying and implementing improvements in biosecurity on farm and at additional destinations such as markets.
- Dealing with any consistent non-compliance issues such as overdue tests and illegal movements
- Identifying improvements in enforcement and compliance delivery across organisations.
- Improving integration of local veterinary services
- Improving awareness and understanding of TB.
- Improving the process of managing the individual circumstance of breakdowns, particularly by using the relationship between private veterinary practitioners and their clients.
- Making recommendations on how to keep clean areas free from disease.

Based on their experience of tackling local and regional activities, the Boards will have the ability to provide advice and guidance on the revision or development of new national TB policies.

It is envisaged that the Boards will report to the TB Eradication Programme Board regularly and that their role and membership will be reviewed after 12 months.

Intensive Action Pilot Area (IAPA)

The TB Eradication Programme actions will differ in various parts of Wales. I want to see a Wales where both livestock and wildlife exist in a disease free environment; we should not allow either to suffer this disease. I therefore agreed to commission further work at official level, with a view to authorising a cull of badgers in a pilot area of Wales on the basis that certain conditions are met.

The information required to make a decision on whether or not to authorise a cull is currently being collated and reviewed; this includes ecological reviews and epidemiological assessments and ethical and practical considerations. It is important that further decisions are made with the best available information and, in accordance with all relevant legal requirements. Hence, we have commissioned technical experts with over twenty years of experience in their respective fields, to investigate the potential effects of different badger control strategies, including the identification of topographical features that may affect badger dispersal. In addition to this, epidemiological data is being investigated to assess areas where any intervention is likely to have a beneficial effect.

Since announcing the TB Eradication Programme in April my officials and I have maintained an open dialogue with a range of interested groups. I am keen for that dialogue to continue. I will also continue to ensure that those welfare and wildlife groups that are already part of the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy Steering Group are fully involved in the discussions.

After announcing the TB Eradication Programme in April I received notification of an intention to pursue a judicial review to challenge any decision to cull badgers. Given the sensitivities surrounding this issue and the strong and sincerely held views held by a range of parties, this is not surprising. We are, of course, subject to a range of legal obligations that are relevant to a potential cull and I would not seek to carry out a cull or any other action that would not be consistent with these legal obligations. For this reason, it is crucial that, before any final decision is taken, I am satisfied that our proposals are fully consistent with the law. These matters need to be assessed carefully, in light of the relevant scientific and other factors that are currently being considered. This will take some time and I anticipate that I will be in a position to make a decision on this issue in the New Year.

Addressing the reservoir of TB in wildlife, including badgers, is one part of a larger programme of activities and is not the answer for all of Wales. In areas where we believe the cattle population to be clear of the disease our policy will be to continue testing cattle and promoting good biosecurity. A badger cull is unlikely to be appropriate for disease control in these areas.

Vaccination is potentially a supportive tool to use to eradicate TB. We will continue to work with DEFRA on research and the potential to demonstrate the effectiveness of a badger vaccine as soon as possible. I stress again, as I have done from the outset, that the badger remains a protected species in

Wales, under the terms of the Protection of Badgers Act 1992. Illegal action against them will not be tolerated.

In accordance with our aim to tackle all sources of infection, may I take this opportunity to remind you that the consultation on a framework for preventing and managing incidents of bovine TB in Camelids in Wales closes at the end of October and I would urge all those with an interest in this issue to respond.

TB Compensation Levels in Wales

Administrative measures to tackle the overcompensation of TB reactors were introduced in 2007. These included justification to be required automatically in all cases where the valuation exceeds specific thresholds and selected valuations to be monitored by appointed Monitor Valuers. The administrative changes to the valuation system have been reviewed following the first 6 months of full implementation. The evidence from this review is that the changes to the valuation processes are having a positive impact on over-compensation particularly in relation to pedigree animals. The average TB compensation payment for a pedigree animal has fallen from £4,900 in November 2006 to around £3,400 in June 2008. This is during a period, particularly over the past year, where there has generally been an increase in market prices. This fall is also significant because pedigree animals make up around only 30% of the animals slaughtered but some 60% of the compensation bill. We will continue to monitor the valuation process over the next 6 months.

As per my statement in April it is still my intention to link compensation payments to good biosecurity and good animal husbandry on farms. I believe this is a key way of encouraging farmers to fulfil their responsibilities and comply with legal and best practice requirements. My officials are currently working up options with the industry chaired Animal Health and Welfare Strategy Steering Group and others with a view to publishing a consultation in the New Year.

Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFAH) position

The European Commission continues to be concerned at the TB situation in the UK following the recent incident where veal calves, exported to the Netherlands from a holding in England, were subsequently found to be infected with TB. The Commission has indicated that it intends to introduce a safeguard measure, bringing into force additional controls around calves (too young to be tested) exported from high TB incidence areas. A vote on a safeguard measure is likely to be taken at the next SCoFAH meeting in early October. All administrations in the UK are working together to try to ensure that any action taken by the Commission is proportionate and addresses the risks. Our pro-active approach to eradicate TB is critical and will help to demonstrate to the Commission the good work we are doing in Wales.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the developments I have announced today are consistent with the comprehensive approach we must take if we are to eradicate this disease. Government alone can not achieve the eradication of TB. These initiatives show a collaborative approach between farmers, vets and Government with each taking a share of the responsibility to eradicate TB in Wales. This is a long term programme and this is just the beginning of our journey to eradicate TB in Wales in line with our One Wales Commitment.

I will provide a further update on TB Eradication Programme activities and progress to the Assembly in 4 weeks when we will discuss additional TB powers.