

An English TB Eradication Report, by Bill Harper, NBA south west, which should be viewed by those with an interest in bovine TB

The NBA is represented on the TB Eradication Group by its TB Committee Chairman, Bill Harper. The report that follows is taken from the Group's initial report and action plan delivered in October.

The NBA has driven forward the work on making AQU's more manageable and has initiated the work on the new category AQU (Approved Quarantine Unit). These units have two uses, firstly to facilitate the rearing of TB restricted Holstein/Friesian male calves and the movement of them, once tested and at 12 weeks of age to a second AQU attached to the finishing farm.

Secondly to allow the movement of TB restricted suckled calves below the age of 10 months to an AQU where they will be tested twice and if clean may be grazed. Both these systems will help farmers cope when under TB restrictions. For further details see the DEFRA website.

The Bovine TB Eradication Group for England was established by the Government, the farming industry and the veterinary profession in November 2008 to make recommendations to the Secretary of State on bovine TB and its eradication. This report presents the progress we, as the Group, have made in developing a Bovine TB eradication Programme for England; the risk-based approach we are taking in identifying and assessing new policies; and changes that are being made following recommendations we have made to the Secretary of State.

Bovine TB is complex: it is a chronic disease, and it takes time for any new measures introduced to lead to a reduction in disease prevalence. An eradication programme is an investment in maintaining trade in cattle and dairy products and protecting public health, but the cost and effort involved should not be underestimated and the timescales for delivering results will be lengthy. This is why we have made short term measures for reducing the impact of TB restrictions on farmers one of our more immediate priorities.

There is no single measure which will achieve the eradication of bovine TB. We will need to have in place and to use a range of tools: effective diagnostic tests; targeted cattle controls; and vaccination for badgers and cattle; and to remain open to the possibility of using badger culling. These tools need to be used in a targeted way to reflect disease risk so we have a proactive approach rather than continuing to play catch up as we are with the current testing regime. We have defined five areas (high risk; edges of high risk; medium; declining and low risk areas) as a basis for considering and targeting different measures effectively.

This report is a base from which we can move forward. We have agreed with the Secretary of State a series of changes that should be implemented, and some of these have already been introduced.

The recommendations that have already been implemented are designed to assist farmers under TB restriction to maintain their businesses. These are;
Subject to a veterinary risk assessment, the general movement license can be used to allow movements of unrestricted cattle on to a TB breakdown herd for the duration of a breakdown. This is a change from the previous approach where a new license was required for each movement.

Movement to cattle to/from breakdown herds will be permitted over longer distances to help facilitate restocking. This is of particular benefit to owners of pedigree and/or organic cattle who can find it difficult to find the right replacement cattle.

Movement of untested calves (aged under 42 days) direct to slaughter via approved collection centres will be permitted, so reducing the number that have to be killed on farm.

These initial changes are small in the wider context of bovine TB. However, they are a start and go some way to reducing bureaucracy for those under restriction and streamlining processes for Animal Health. The measures that will be introduced over the coming months will go further and be targeted both at improving disease control and at helping TB affected farm businesses.

The most significant changes we have agreed with the Secretary of State are to change the areas on which testing frequencies are set and in interim approach to setting testing frequencies which will be implemented in the coming months. We also recommended and agreed that England's approach to inconclusive reactors needed to comply with European legislation and we have agreed that the policy will be changed to allow only one retest from 1st January 2010. The other recommendations we have made and Hilary Benn has agreed should be implemented are:

Providing advice on bovine TB to restricted farms (implementation from early 2010);
Providing a dispersal sale option for owners of TB breakdown herds (implementation by the end of 2009);
Revised testing requirements for entry to and within Approved Finishing Units (AFU's) thereby encouraging more to be set up (implementation by the end of October 2009);
Encourage the setting up of more "quarantine units" as a trade outlet for calves currently killed on farm (implementation by the end of 2009); and
Providing greater flexibility on the timing of short interval tests in breakdown herds in high risk areas (implementation by the end of October 2009).

In addition to the changes discussed above we also agreed, in principle, with the Secretary of State that we need to find a new approach to tackling unconfirmed breakdowns; and, in order to overcome some of the confusion around TB controls, that the terminology around breakdowns will be changed.

We are confident that the changes described in this report represent a positive first step in the development of an Eradication Programme for England. However, the group also recognises that real progress toward eradication for those in high risk areas can only be

made once measures are in place to tackle disease in wild life on a large scale. In their absence, we see the additional support to farm businesses under restriction as crucial.

We are pleased to be able to say that the UK Eradication Plan for 2010 was submitted to the Commission in September 2009 and, while the material covering England within the Plan only represents a small part of what we want to achieve as a Group, we believe it sets a good foundation for the industry in England and Government to work with colleagues in Europe by making clear to the Commission and other Member States the England (and the UK) are serious about tackling bovine TB. Eradication plans have to be submitted annually and we aim to play a similarly active role in the future.

The Group uses the analogy of the "Toolbox Approach" meaning that all the tools in the box will need to be used to tackle this disease.

The one tool that is still in the box is badger culling and at the moment it is still in its wrapper with no instruction manual written as to its operation.

The farming industry is currently divided as to the best way of tackling the disease in the wild life. Whether we tackle a hotspot area with hard boundaries and significantly reduce the population of badgers or alternatively try to identify diseased sets and remove the badgers in them.

We need to agree as an industry what we want because any division will seriously weaken our case, which will ultimately be decided at Judicial Review level, so any plan put forward must have a sound scientific evidence base or it will fail and we will be back to square one.

A change of Government, and a new level of co-operation amongst farmers, will be essential to begin eradicating this disease.