

Westminster Hall Debate
16 Oct 2013 : Column 306WH
Badger Vaccines

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise that one of the benefits of vaccination versus a cull is that vaccinations have no perturbation effect?

David Morris: I agree totally. Vaccination increases herd immunity, while culling increases the spread of disease.

Tracey Crouch: Is my hon. Friend aware that the response to a recent freedom of information request on 22 September shows a significant reduction in the amount of departmental investment in the oral vaccine particularly, but also in all other research into injectable vaccine and cattle vaccines? Spending on the oral vaccine will fall from around £2.5 million to £312,000 in 2015. Should that not be dealt with “drekly”, as the Cornish might say?

George Eustice: It seems that the word “drekly” is catching on in the House. I will deal with oral vaccination later. Right now, only the injectable BCG is available to tackle bovine TB and it does not fully guarantee protection. Some animals will be fully protected, some will benefit from a reduction in the disease, but some will get no protection. That is a shortcoming of a vaccination policy, but it would be a useful addition to the toolkit and we will use it to tackle the disease when we can perfect it.

Opposition Day — [1st Allotted Day] — Badger Cull
House of Commons
5 June 2013
2:50 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford, Conservative)

When I spoke in a previous debate on this issue, I was one of few Conservative Members who stood up, spoke, and then voted against the culling of badgers. I was surrounded by colleagues who profoundly disagreed with me, some of whom have barely spoken to me since. It was one of the most daunting experiences in my short time here. Today feels like groundhog day, although this time it has come with added pressure for me to change my mind or abstain on the matter. I have been accused—rather patronisingly—of not understanding the science and, worse, of condemning farmers in individual constituencies to further incidences of disease. I have been told that I do not understand the horrific impact of bovine TB in cattle, or indeed in badgers, and that culling badgers is actually a way to be kind to them, rather than being cruel, and thus my fears about animal welfare should be allayed.

Let me be clear: I have enormous sympathy for farmers affected by bovine TB, not simply because of the clear financial cost to farms, but because of the way the disease impacts on farmers' lives and livelihoods, and often, as colleagues have stated, their mental health. I have listened to colleagues recounting stories from their own constituencies, and it is dreadful—truly horrible. However, I do understand the science, and the indiscriminate culling of badgers will not, in my mind, stop bovine TB from occurring in the future.

The eradication of bovine TB in badgers will not lead to the eradication of the disease in cattle, especially in a country with extremely high cattle movement. Cattle-to cattle transmission would continue, as already demonstrated in low-incidence areas such as Kent where evidence shows that that type of transmission accounts for 80% or more of cases. No other country in the world has yet eradicated bovine TB in cattle, and they certainly have not reduced it with culling alone. The Secretary of State was right earlier to refer to a package of measures, but

he did not answer the question from my hon. Friend Mrs Main about the balance of success between those methods.

We must be realistic about what the badger cull, and these pilots in particular, will achieve. Our leading scientists note that a cull will reduce incidence of the disease by 16% at best, but even that figure is based on a long-term, large-scale cull. Therefore, the extensive, indiscriminate culling of badgers, three quarters of which will not have TB, will leave 84% of the problem. More worryingly, although bovine TB is relatively confined at the moment to certain areas of the country, a cull could lead to the problem spreading rather than being contained. To the colleague who told me yesterday that his farmers want a cull because they neighbour areas with the disease, let me say that I am against such a cull in order to protect those farmers, not condemn them. Badgers do not adhere to county borders and disperse under the threat of extinction. The cull will not make any significant impact in the pilot areas, but it could in those areas close by. It is welcome to hear from the Secretary of State that DEFRA is using other preventive measures to control the spread of the disease in those areas, but will that be enough?

I had a quick opportunity to read the report by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published today, and I congratulate the Committee Chair, my hon. Friend Miss McIntosh, on it. Severe criticism of departmental delays and publication of misleading information aside, it is clear that all sides wish to see a vast improvement in developing and providing a vaccine solution to the problem. As Kent Wildlife Trust put it to me, instead of culling badgers, the Government should further improve cattle movement controls and testing, and support farmers to implement simple biosecurity measures. They should prioritise the development of a cattle vaccine, and divert the estimated £6 million cost of licensing, monitoring and policing the pilot culls into a major programme of Government-funded badger vaccination. Only then will we get on top of this disease in an effective way.

I conclude by congratulating colleagues on this side of the House who will show their opposition to the cull by abstaining on the motion today. Within the Westminster village we know and understand why many feel uncomfortable going into the Opposition Lobby on an Opposition motion that is, in effect, non-binding. It is a nuance often misunderstood outside Parliament, but I thank those colleagues for their support all the same. I, however, will not be abstaining, and although it will probably make little difference in the great scheme of things, I want my voting record to show that I am against this barbaric, indiscriminate and ill-thought-through cull. I would prefer a science-led, welfare-oriented response to the control and reduction of bovine TB that protects both cattle and badgers from this nasty disease.

Badger Cull
Business of the House
25 October 2012
3:17 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford, Conservative)

It is a pleasure to have an opportunity to speak in this important debate, and to follow Ian Paisley, whom I admire immensely, but disagree with entirely on this issue.

It is an incredibly emotive issue, and one that has caused me to rethink my position. I had originally been in favour of the cull. I had—and still have—enormous sympathy for the farmers who are affected by bovine TB. There is not just the monetary cost to the farm, but the immense strain on farmers. That should not be underestimated. So when the culling of badgers was announced as a means of eradicating bovine TB, it seemed to be a sensible solution. However, it became clear that the science did not stack up. As someone who is rather proud of their track record on animal welfare

issues, I began to feel uncomfortable with my original position. Having looked into the issue in more detail—which I am glad I did—I am convinced that the badger cull is absolutely the wrong way to tackle bovine TB.

The issue is very sensitive. It affects farmers' lives and livelihoods, and often their mental health, but it is an issue that has been tainted by misinformation. For example, it is often stated that the eradication of TB in badgers would lead to the eradication of the disease in cattle, but that is simply not the case. Cattle-to-cattle transmission would continue, as demonstrated in low incidence areas such as Kent, where there is evidence that cattle-to-cattle transmission accounts for 80% or more of cases.

While there is an indisputable link between badgers and bovine TB, many other animals also carry TB: deer, wild boar, foxes, alpacas and even cats and dogs. We need to be clear, therefore: instead of saying "No other country in the world has eradicated TB in cattle without tackling it in wildlife", the Government should state, "No other country in the world has eradicated TB in cattle." Therefore, we need to be realistic about what precisely a badger cull would achieve.

Other cattle-farming countries have learned lessons from attempted culls. In Australia, Asian buffalo—an introduced alien species thought to be spreading TB—were culled by shooting from helicopters. However, TB in cattle was reduced only by draconian testing and the culling of cattle, with whole herds slaughtered—that effectively kept TB under control for many decades. In New Zealand, brush-tailed possums, another introduced species, were poisoned for decades—that went alongside draconian cattle-testing regimes. However, it has since been realised that poisoning is unsustainable, and scientists have recommended the vaccination of possums instead. In the USA, white-tailed deer in Michigan were found to be sharing feeding stations with cattle, thus allowing TB transmission. The simple solution was to separate the deer from the feeding stations.

The proposed badger cull will not eradicate bovine TB from our cattle. Our leading scientists note that it will reduce the incidence by, at best, 16%, so a long-term, large-scale cull of badgers would leave 84% of the problem remaining. I heard what my right hon. Friend Sir James Paice said about this being 16% net, with a more likely figure of 30%, but that still means that 70% of the problem remains. In addition, the Government are not

proposing a long-term, large-scale cull; they are proposing two pilots in areas where they do not know how many badgers there are. The original estimates were that it would be necessary to cull only between 500 and 800 badgers in each of the two areas, thus achieving the 70% culling target. However, in the space of a weekend that number was increased to more than 5,000 in the two areas—that represents a massive increase in the badger population in just a few days, and if badgers are breeding like rabbits, we are facing an entirely different problem.

As Lord Krebs eloquently told the upper House:

"What this underlines is that if the policy is to cull at least 70% of the badgers, we have to know what the starting number is. This variation from just over 1,000 to more than 5,000 in the space of a few days underlines how difficult it is for us to have confidence that the Government will be able to instruct the farmers to cull 70% if they do not know the starting numbers."—[Hansard, House of Lords, 23 October 2012; Vol. 740, c. 148.]

That is why our scientists and animal welfare activists, and many, many of my constituents, believe the proposals to cull badgers when an accurate figure cannot be circulated—leaving aside the welfare issue of indiscriminately shooting badgers, 75% of which will be TB free—are simply mindless.

Other nations have not simply resorted to culling, but have looked at alternative options. Wales, where most of the UK incidences occur, has decided to vaccinate, not cull. The Minister will have heard, and will continue to hear, calls for a stronger focus on vaccination, and he needs to go back to the Department and reinstate the five—out of six—vaccination trials cancelled when we took office.

James Paice (South East Cambridgeshire, Conservative)

As it was me who cancelled those “trials”, I feel that I need to respond. May I make it absolutely clear to my hon. Friend and to the House that they were not “trials”, as she has just described them, but vaccine deployment projects? They were nothing to do with testing vaccines; they simply sought to work out how to trap, inject and so on. They were about the mechanics. I decided, rightly or wrongly, that we did not need six of these things, costing £7 million or £8 million, and that everything could be learned from one. That is why we did what we did.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford, Conservative)

I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s intervention, but I still think that we need to put more investment into our trials programme, in order to learn more.

Reactive culling does not work. It will spread the disease—evidence suggests that it may even increase the incidence of the disease. So it is clear that the Government need to listen to the scientists and rethink their strategy.