

Circulation: NFU Members

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Bovine TB – Lobbying Your MP

The government's proposals for tackling bovine TB include, among other measures, a targeted cull of badgers in high-disease areas. These proposals do not require any specific authorisation from Parliament. Nevertheless, the position taken by MPs and peers on the issue is extremely important: the topic is likely to be debated in Parliament, and while the outcome of any debate cannot directly change government policy on bovine TB, it can be very influential. The government's conviction on the issue could come under pressure if they feel a lack of support amongst Parliamentarians. Furthermore, campaigners can use debates to raise the profile of an issue and to demonstrate to the public the strength of feeling among their elected representatives.

It is therefore vital that farmers and others who recognise the importance of the government's policy on badger control contact their MPs, or even better meet with them, to explain why this approach is so vital.

In the first instance, we are urging members to write to MPs, setting out the reasons a cull is necessary. It is always preferable to write in your own words, but below you will find some useful guidance and some points you may want to include in any letter. You should also write about your own experiences to give them an understanding of the specific challenges their constituents are facing with the disease. If appropriate you can invite the MP to your farm to see how you operate and to hear about your own experiences in dealing with bTB.

Some MPs are familiar with the arguments around bTB, and have good relationships with farmers in their constituencies. Many, however, do not. It is particularly important if you feel your MP is not familiar with farming issues, or if you know they have formerly objected to the government's plans for a cull of badgers, to contact them and make clear the strength of feeling on your side of the argument. They will no doubt have been lobbied heavily by groups opposed to any cull, so it is vital that you demonstrate to them that there is another, very persuasive, side to this story.

If you need any further assistance with contacting your MP please get in touch with your regional office, or with our staff in the NFU's Westminster office on 0207 808 6600. If you are unsure, you can find out who your MP is and where to write to them at this website:

<http://findyourmp.parliament.uk/>

GUIDANCE ON WRITING TO MPs

Open your letter by introducing yourself as a constituent and explain you are writing about the issue of bovine TB. If you are happy to ask them to visit your farm, say so at the outset and repeat the offer at the end of the letter.

Acknowledge this is an emotive and difficult topic, and that it is understandable that many people are uncomfortable with the prospect of culling badgers. However, the main objective is a healthy countryside – and that means both healthy cattle and healthy badgers. Show emotion and passion for the issue, but it goes without saying that it's best to remain civil too. Overly-aggressive approaches can end up losing the support of an MP before they have even got round to considering the points you're making.

Key points to make

- No one takes the decision to cull badger controls lightly. If there was an alternative we would do it, but the commonly cited alternatives, such as vaccination, will simply not be effective at halting the relentless spread of the disease without targeted culling as well.
- Vaccination is part of the solution, but will not work alone. Vaccination has no effect on badgers already carrying TB, so will not effectively tackle the reservoir of infection in the badger population; the only available vaccine for badgers requires trapping and injecting each animal – something that is both hugely expensive and very impractical; there is no legally available cattle vaccine, and no badger vaccine that can be administered orally.
- Contrary to claims that the science does not support the government's stance on badger controls, the latest evidence clearly shows that culling does lead to a reduction in disease levels. The most recent follow up work of the Randomised Badger Control Trials have
 - shown a reduced level of TB infection inside the control area of over 30%, while in the area outside the trials the incidence of TB in cattle remained the same
- No other country in the world has ever got on top of TB in cattle without first addressing it in wildlife and breaking the cycle of infection. For instance, since 2008 badger control measures in the Republic of Ireland have resulted in a decrease of TB in cattle by almost a third.
- Claims that the cull will lead to widespread destruction of the badger population are extremely misleading. Culls will only take place in specific areas where disease incidence is very high. Around 1,000 badgers are expected to be removed in the first year in the first trial area, less in subsequent years. Compare this to the 34,000 cattle that were culled because of TB in 2011.
- Everyone involved will be working towards ensuring these actions are humane, effective and safe. That is the point of the two pilot culls that have been announced.