

Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) is a chronic infectious disease of mammals, spread via excretions and exhalations. Cattle, humans, pigs, foxes, deer and badgers alike can become infected. Control measures like milk pasteurisation and vaccinations mean that risk of human infection is very low.

bTB is slow growing and both difficult to detect and eradicate. Cattle are tested once a year; if that skin test reacts positively that 'reactor' animal is immediately removed from the herd and slaughtered and the remaining herd placed under movement restrictions. Irish farmers contribute almost €35m annually to this eradication scheme, even before the individual costs associated with those restrictions and losses suffered from animals being removed are included.

Without question, TB in Badgers and TB in cattle are linked. Badgers can infect cattle and cattle also infect badgers. Part of the reasoning behind the government's support of blanket culling of badgers in bTB hotspots is that up until recently there was no reliable TB detection test for live badgers. This is no longer the case. Rapid field tests now exist for badgers and vaccinations are available for both badgers and cattle. Trapping and testing in the field is currently practised in Northern Ireland, where infected badgers are culled and uninfected animals are vaccinated.

The current situation here is that an eradication programme of badgers which are not being screened for disease is being carried out alongside a movement restriction programme in cattle which are known to have been exposed to bTB in the previous 12 months. From the point of view of disease prevention, if culling is the solution then one group should not be targeted independently of the other. From an ethical point of view, the badger again draws the short straw, cruelly suffering in snares for extended periods when trapped, often leaving defenceless young to die of starvation.

Since 1984, the Irish government has killed some 100, 000 badgers; in that time the reactor detection rate has remained largely static. In 2011, €70 million of citizen's money was allocated to the eradication programme and in the following year, €3.4 million was spent directly in killing 7000 badgers, to reduce the national bTB figure by 55 cows. A decade long culling study in the UK concluded that *"badger culling can make no meaningful contribution to cattle control in Britain"*. Crucially the effectiveness of the eradication programme in Ireland has never been subject to proper scientific evaluation.

Under Food Harvest 2020, the government plans to increase the value of agricultural output by 33% over the next 5 years. Coupled with the end of milk quota regime on March 31st of this year, there's little doubt that Irish herd numbers will increase. In that situation, increased herd densities and the greater movement of cattle between herds would inevitably lead to an increase in bovine TB reactors, with or without badgers. A change of thinking will be required to prevent the badger being the fall guy.