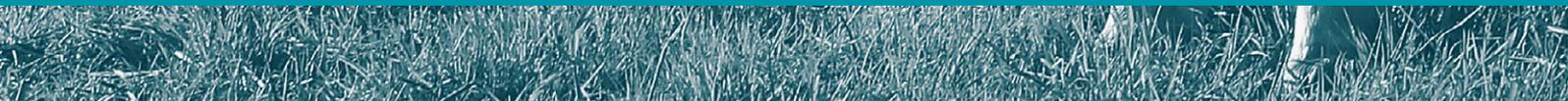




Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland

March 2022



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Foreword

Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) is a devastating disease of cattle which impacts upon farming families right across Northern Ireland (NI), both financially and emotionally.

The current levels of disease incidence (herd incidence stood at 8.83% for the 12 months to the end of January) are much too high and has a significant impact on our cattle industry, including loss of production and is a potential barrier to trade. I am also acutely aware of the pressure a bTB breakdown can have on farm families.

Alongside this, the financial cost of our bTB Control Programme to the public purse has been in excess of £40million annually. The significant yearly expenditure cannot continue and has been criticised by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. This is not sustainable given the current pressures on the public purse and public services, particularly as we seek to recover from the economic impact of Covid-19.

All of these factors provide a powerful, and urgent, incentive to achieve eradication of this disease as soon as possible.

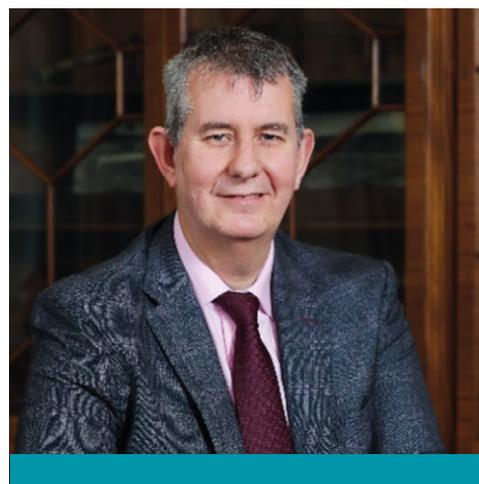
Our current bTB Control Programme underpins the ability of NI's livestock sectors to trade internationally. In 2018, NI had sales of processed food to external markets worth £4billion, of which external sales of milk and milk products were estimated to be worth £900 million, and external sales of beef and sheep meat products were just under £1.3 billion. However, having left the EU, and with the UK seeking to strike new international trade deals, we are only too aware that sustained high levels of bTB may be a trade barrier, curtailing our agri-food industry's access to new markets

It is why, as Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I am pleased to have taken decisions on a new way forward to how we approach tackling bTB.

This new eradication strategy outlines what I intend the next steps to be. I am pleased to detail below the actions my Department has taken in recent years - **what has been done**; and

The proposals which I intend to introduce as part of the new bTB Eradication Strategy - **what I will do**.

With regard to what I will do, it is my intention, to proceed with a number of measures which will be taken forward as part of this new Strategy. These relate to how my Department works better with farmers, vets, conservationists, landowners and other key stakeholders and how we can improve and enhance the current regime of testing and disease prevention. They also relate to





how we can work better with farmers and vets to help them stop disease entering the farm in the first place; and, importantly, how we can broaden the scope of research into the nature and cause of bTB infection and spread.

If the bTB Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland is to be successful all factors which contribute to the spread and maintenance of the disease must be addressed.

All of the areas identified for action must proceed and make a meaningful contribution. This was stated by the TB Strategic Partnership Group (TBSPG) which delivered the original recommendations [TBSPG Bovine TB Eradication Strategy NI | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk) to my Department to set us on a path to eradication in 2016, and is a position I fully support.

I do not believe there is any argument about whether badgers can contract bTB and act as a reservoir of bTB within the environment. They therefore have an important role in the disease picture, which must be addressed. I know this is an emotive issue with strongly held – and often varied views. However, the introduction of a programme of badger intervention, as international experience has shown, is an essential underpinning component of any new Strategy aiming to achieve bTB eradication.

Furthermore, ensuring joint ownership between government and industry is essential in pushing us on a path to bTB eradication.

I do believe that it is right that the compensation system is looked at as part of the overall Strategy, and that reform will underpin the Strategy's principles of working in partnership with industry, sharing costs, sharing delivery and sharing ownership.

Changes would also help re-balance the financial cost of our TB programme.

However, I am very aware that the farming industry faces a number of challenges at the moment and into the immediate future.

I also know that many farmers operate good buying practice and put in place strong biosecurity but still face TB breakdowns due, in some instances, to the role of wildlife in TB spread.

Taking this into account, I am not content to proceed with the introduction of a cap on individual compensation payments of £5,000 and, whilst I am supportive of a reduction on the level of compensation paid from the current 100%, I do not intend to implement this change now. I have asked officials, instead, to review the position two years after implementation of the full Strategy commences.

I very much appreciate that some of these changes may be difficult, but I am determined to introduce significant measures as the current position cannot continue.



When taking office just over two years ago, I stated that one of my top priorities was to reduce and eradicate bTB. That remains the case. I have listened to farmers, to international experience in other programmes, to veterinary bodies, to conservation groups and to fellow MLAs, and whilst there may be different perspectives on how it is achieved, they all want the same thing as I do - to eradicate bTB from Northern Ireland. I therefore ask for your support for the measures I am introducing.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edwin Poots". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Edwin Poots MLA

Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



Message from the TB Eradication Partnership (TBEP)

Since the TB Eradication Partnership (TBEP) was established in June 2018, one of its key roles has been to provide independent expert advice to DAERA's Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) and policy makers within DAERA on the development of a new bTB eradication strategy for Northern Ireland.



Very few animal diseases have managed to attract the attention, inflame the passion and court the controversy that bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) has, particularly in recent times.

This disease has affected cattle in countries across the globe, and the battle to defeat it has enjoyed varying degrees of success from places where it has been eradicated, like Australia, to others closer to home, where the battle continues.

The TBEP has, at every opportunity, encouraged the Minister and his officials to take account of the widest possible range of views from people and organisations with a vested interest in the eradication of this terrible disease.

The members of the TBEP, in formulating and providing independent advice to the agriculture Minister, have brought their own invaluable individual experience and technical knowledge from farming, veterinary, scientific, and conservation / environmental backgrounds, which has informed discussions, and the formulation of our advice and proposals for a long-term holistic Strategy to eradicate bTB in Northern Ireland.

We had the opportunity over the past 4 years to meet with a wide range of representatives who have a stake in the eradication of this disease and in the promotion of healthy bovine and wildlife populations.

We took the opportunity to consider a full range of opinions, and it was clear to us from the outset that, while there was a general desire to eradicate bTB, there was a variety of strongly held views on how this could be achieved.

It was also clear that any successful eradication strategy would need to contain a comprehensive and interlinked programme of measures and that successful implementation would require compromise from all those with an interest in defeating this disease.



Implementing this bTB Eradication Strategy will take courage, compromise, the support of farmers and nature conservationists, together with on-going scientific research and political backing. The TBEP believes that this Strategy will set us on a decreasing trajectory - and over the next 3 or 4 decades we will have the opportunity to see the disease finally eradicated from Northern Ireland. Working together to implement all of this Strategy – we believe that this is certainly achievable!

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Seán Hogan'. The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

Seán Hogan
Chair TB Eradication Partnership



1. What we have done

Since the independent TB Strategic Partnership Group (TBSPG) published its report in 2016, "[Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland](#)", DAERA has taken additional steps to control bTB in Northern Ireland. In 2015/2016, the Department, acknowledging the need to address the ongoing rise in bTB herd incidence rates, introduced a range of additional bTB Programme measures which included:

- A more stringent interpretation of the single intradermal comparative cervical tuberculin test (SICCT test), the so called bTB skin test;
- Improved disease surveillance at all cattle abattoirs;
- Increased application of the interferon gamma blood test for bTB; and
- The rigorous enforcement of bTB testing standards. Furthermore, in 2017/18 DAERA introduced additional measures relating to enhanced testing and actions to help improve biosecurity as follows:
 - A reactor quality assurance pilot was launched on 6 November 2017;
 - A further tightening of the rules for interpreting bTB skin test results in breakdown herds was introduced in early 2018;
 - Introduction of an additional herd test for recently de-restricted breakdown herds considered to be a higher risk;
 - Reducing the minimum number of reactors, which must be disclosed before Officially Tuberculosis Free (OTF) status is withdrawn from a herd; and
 - The rolling-out of a biosecurity self-assessment checklist made available to farmers and vets.



The Department also completed the 5 year Test, and Vaccinate or Remove (TVR) wildlife intervention research project and established the TB Eradication Partnership (TBEP), an independent expert advisory body, to assist the Department in formulating final recommendations for a Minister on the way forward.



2. What we will do

Governance and partnership working

The Department will now proceed with the following:

- Establish, in one area of Northern Ireland, the first of three Regional Eradication Partnerships (REP);
- Establish Disease Response Teams (DRTs), when and where required, and within the area covered by the first REP; and
- In the medium term, establish two further REPs, with additional DRTs established within these, as required.

Regional Eradication Partnerships would each have a specific focus on bTB eradication in their particular geographical region. The REP's key objective would be to work collaboratively and in partnership with Government and stakeholder representatives to effect the eradication of bTB in their area. They would also provide advice and feedback to the TBEP.

REP meetings would be attended by the relevant regional DAERA Veterinary Managers and a DAERA epidemiologist as necessary. It is envisaged that the TBEP would have a role in the selection of members to sit on the REPs. While members of the REPs should be representative of sectoral interest(s), they would be required to act in the public interest. Specifically, the REP would, with regard to its specific region:

- have an overview of disease incidence;
- monitor action and responses to control and reduce disease;
- examine the impact of disease risk factors and recommend appropriate control measures to DAERA and the TBEP as appropriate;
- review reports from local Disease Response Teams (DRTs) and recommend appropriate actions;
- report to the TBEP including recommendations for action to enhance control;
- disseminate information to stakeholders in relation to the implementation of the bTB Eradication Strategy; and
- provide a forum where key players can collaborate.



Local Disease Response Teams will be formed on an ad hoc basis in response to a serious outbreak, repeated breakdowns in an area, or to deal with particular disease issues. A DRT will be convened by a local DAERA Veterinary Manager and would provide an opportunity for local direct involvement in disease control. It would escalate issues as necessary to the relevant REP.

These teams will share information on bTB breakdowns, response actions and options, seek local support and engagement to address the disease, protect other local herds and disseminate the most up-to-date information on disease outcomes in their locality.

These new governance structures will augment the role of the TB Eradication Partnership, providing a vehicle for input to the bTB programme by key stakeholder groups, particularly the farming industry. There is a perception that delivery of the bTB programme happens largely to farmers rather than farmers and other key parties being able to influence the policy and strategy around that programme. Particularly at a local level farmers can feel distanced from the efforts to eradicate bTB and are only engaged when they suffer a breakdown.

These new engagement structures will address this. REPs and DRTs will involve individual farmers, herd keepers and representatives from the farming industry working in partnership with veterinarians, DAERA, bTB scientific experts, environmentalists and other key stakeholders. These groups will at all levels have the principles of active participation by all, a focus on disease eradication, a remit to influence policy and disease control at a NI level and be independent of government.

3. Enhanced cattle measures and testing

It is essential that cattle infected with bTB are detected and removed from herds as quickly as possible. A key objective of the bTB programme is to minimise the potential for bTB to be transmitted, both within infected herds and from infected to uninfected herds. The Department intends to implement a number of recommendations, as outlined below, relating to surveillance, testing, cattle movement and the re-stocking of breakdown herds, including a new measure relating to the introduction of legislation to enable the bTB testing of non-bovines such as deer or camelids, where required, on holdings where cattle are not present.

3.1 The increased use of interferon gamma testing

The interferon gamma test (IFN-g) is a supplementary diagnostic test that is currently used alongside the tuberculin skin test in selected bTB breakdown herds to increase the likelihood of detecting remaining bTB infection in the herd. Current testing capacity is 23,000 individual animal tests per annum, however, testing capacity will increase to 45,000 over the next three years. The test is currently offered on a voluntary basis. The TBSPG recommended that the Department made it compulsory for herd keepers to permit the test to be carried out on their herds where it was considered necessary, and for all animals testing positive to be removed. The rationale being that this would be beneficial in identifying test positive animals at the earliest stage and removing these from the herd to prevent further infection.



The compulsory removal of all animals, which react positively to an IFN-g test was implemented in spring 2021. To implement the Department's recommendation in full, the Department proposed that the following criteria, which are broadly similar to the criteria used to offer the test on a voluntary basis, will be used to determine which herds will be selected for compulsory interferon gamma testing.

Interferon Gamma Testing Criteria

- IFN-g testing will continue to be conducted primarily in herds that have the status 'Officially Tuberculosis Withdrawn' (OTW) and are due a Restricted Herd Test (RHT) or First Restricted Herd Test (RH1).
- IFN-g testing is to be carried out on animals over the age of six months only. These are known as eligible animals.
- All eligible animals in the herd are to be tested, unless a veterinary risk assessment indicates that this is unlikely to be of benefit in controlling that bTB breakdown. For example, when certain groups are managed completely separately and present a negligible risk of having bTB infection. In such cases, 'at risk' groups only will be tested.
- Herds with multiple reactors at a single test are generally to be prioritised above those that fit other criteria. Within this criterion, we aim to conduct testing in order of where the disease risk is considered highest, for example, new breakdowns and herds with at least 4 or more reactors at a single skin test.
- On occasion, the Department may deem it necessary to 'de-couple' IFN-g sampling from the next skin test. For example, sampling may be carried out shortly after a positive skin test with multiple reactors to identify further infected animals as quickly as possible and remove them from the herd. The Department may also apply the IFN-g test at any stage in the testing cycle where atypical skin test results have been found or in any situation where there is suspicion of fraudulent activity.
- To inform decision making on a partial or total herd depopulation, for example, when a large or valuable group of non-reactor cattle are being considered for slaughter due to a high incidence of skin test reactors and/or multiple animals confirmed with bTB following lesions at routine slaughter (LRS).
- In herds with ongoing OTW breakdowns, that are not resolving despite serial skin testing at severe interpretation. LRS(s) animals that confirm with bTB and contribute to the duration of such breakdowns may also be considered under this criterion. Priority will be given to herds with unresolved breakdowns lasting at least 18 months at first and as laboratory capacity increases, the length of the breakdown required to fit this criterion will be reduced.



- In herds with recurrence of disease shortly after resolving an OTW breakdown, indicating residual infection within the herd. For example, herds that disclose reactors at either the first or second Check Herd Test (CH1 or CH2) or disclose LRS(s) shortly after a clearance test.
- IFN-g testing may be carried out more than once over the course of a breakdown if the herd continues to fit the criteria, with prioritisation applied as above depending on the disease risk. As IFN-g testing resource is limited, herds that have not yet availed of IFN-g testing will generally be prioritised over those that have already tested, if the disease risk is similar.
- It will not be possible to apply the criteria uniformly throughout the year for logistical and capacity reasons due to seasonal testing patterns, with priority given to herds where the disease risk is considered greatest.

The Department notes concerns over the move to compulsory testing expressed by some respondents to the 2021 consultation. The Department, while intending to progress with the recommendation will:

- Engage further with stakeholders with a view to agreeing criteria to make testing compulsory, where required.

3.2 Action on persistently infected herds

It is intended, working with the TBEP and the farming industry, to develop criteria to define persistently infected herds and to develop a protocol for the application of a range of responses to deal with persistently infected herds.

The 2016 TBSPG report identified 'chronic herds' as being an area worthy of specific action, which should include the development of a package of measures designed to minimise the impact of these breakdowns on bTB eradication.

Previous research has indicated that up to 40% of all bTB reactors are disclosed in persistently infected herds.

In particular the Department will establish a working group of Departmental officials, TBEP and industry representatives to:

- Agree and define the criteria for persistently infected herds;
- Share these criteria with the industry; and
- Address related issues and develop additional tools to deal with persistently infected herds.



3.3 Requirement for a herd test prior to re-stocking

This TBSPG recommendation noted that the Department was not in full compliance with EU Council Directive 78/52/EEC. This Directive required negative results on all animals over six weeks of age before allowing movement onto a farm following any disclosure of disease and an epidemiological assessment prior to re-stocking.

The TBSPG recommended a phased implementation of this requirement. However, as this Directive was replaced by the EU Animal Health Law (AHL) in April 2021, the legislative requirements regarding re-stocking are subject to change. For instance, the AHL also requires cleansing and disinfection to have been completed before re-stocking can take place. As the result of the changed legislative position, a veterinary opinion was sought on whether this recommendation required revision as it no longer needed to align with EU legislation in the first instance. In particular, the assessment examined whether a change in emphasis was needed from a herd test requirement prior to restocking to a more risk based approach. Its assessment recommended that a risk based approach, rather than one which is solely based on herd tests, would be preferred. It also recommended that appropriate cleansing and disinfection form part of this risk assessment prior to restocking being allowed. This would also ensure compliance with the changed legislative requirements as a result of the AHL.

The Department will develop, in consultation with Stakeholders and the TBEP, a risk based approach to permit restocking to take place following a breakdown.

3.4 Allow limited moves from bTB breakdown herds under certain conditions.

When a herd is restricted for bTB for an extended period, overstocking and cash flow difficulties can adversely affect the farm business.

Movement restrictions are required by legislation and these laws exist to reduce the risk of disease spread from a breakdown herd to other herds.

3.5 Alternative Control Herds (ACH) are defined as non-grazing herds, which have adopted significantly enhanced biosecurity measures, meaning that reduced testing regimes can be used. More detailed information can be found on the DAERA website at this link:

[Alternative control herds | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

The Department will as part of a review with the TBEP and industry;

- Consider the introduction of limited moves from bTB breakdown herds to approved rearing/finishing herds which are 100% housed and which meet defined, strict biosecurity conditions;



- review, in conjunction with the TBEP, its current ACH policy in relation to this recommendation; and
- consider, as part of this review and in conjunction with the TBEP, the limited application of its current ACH policy and establish what particular barriers there may be to increasing uptake.

3.6 Reactor quality assurance checks

It was recommended by the TBSPG that following completion of the Reactor Quality Assurance (RQA) pilot scheme the Department should consider further appropriate policy changes, which could include introducing a policy on bTB reactor quality assurance and further actions where fraud is suspected. The RQA pilot has recently been concluded and its findings published. These findings will now be considered with a view to drafting protocols to deal with atypical responses to the tuberculin skin test.

The Department will:

- Keep its procedures in relation to atypical reactions to the tuberculin test under review and, in conjunction with the TBEP, will continue to consider additional measures to counteract suspected fraudulent activity; and
- Expand the use of molecular techniques to support bTB eradication.

Strain typing is the characterisation of the bTB organism using techniques such as Variable Number Tandem Repeats (VNTR) and Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS). These techniques are evolving and have been the subject of Department funded research. WGS has the potential to provide more detailed epidemiological information, which will improve our understanding of the maintenance and spread of bTB. Expanding the use of such molecular techniques could improve our understanding of transmission dynamics (cattle to cattle, badger to cattle, cattle to badger, and badger to badger). It therefore has the potential to inform wildlife intervention strategies.

The Department will:

- Work with the TBEP and industry to expand the use of molecular techniques, drawing on DAERA/AFBI's set of molecular strain typing data gathered over 15 years.

3.7 Provision for the testing of non-bovines

At present, the Department can only require non-bovine animals such as camelids or deer to be tested for bTB where there are cattle on the farm holding. New legislation would enable non-bovines to be tested, where required, on holdings where no cattle are present and to compel the removal of infected animals.

Such testing would be required where the Department has evidence or reasonable suspicion that infection exists. Similar legislation is in place in other jurisdictions. The TPSPG had



recommended that the introduction of new legislation for non-bovines be kept under review. The Department believes that this should now be taken forward as part of the package of measures within the new bTB Eradication Strategy.

This was a gap in the powers that the Department had to carry out testing where it deemed necessary, or where there was a risk of bTB spread from non-bovines.

The Department will:

- Work to introduce new subordinate legislation to enable such bTB testing of non-bovine animals to take place in holdings where no cattle are present, where the Department deems these to be necessary.

3.8 Herd health management and biosecurity improvements

Poor herd health management and lax biosecurity increases the risk of disease, impacts on farm health, productivity and costs, and ultimately adversely affects farm business profitability. It also increases the risk of disease spread to neighbouring herds.

This theme of the Strategy aims to support and to encourage farmers to improve their trading and biosecurity practices to reduce the risk of herds becoming infected with bTB, as well as protecting against the risk of other diseases. The Strategy proposes close cooperation with the farming industry and the TBEP to progress six recommendations to improve the management of herd health.

A further proposal regarding the introduction of herd classification will be kept under review. The six actions under this heading are as outlined below.

3.9 Statutory improvement notices

Statutory improvement notices may be used where it is apparent that good herd health management practice is not being adopted voluntarily and is creating a risk to other neighbouring herds despite advice being provided. The introduction of this measure will require further consultation on the detail of the new legislation required to enable the Department to issue such notices. The Department will consider this through existing stakeholder forums and will:

- Work with the farming industry and the TBEP to develop and introduce statutory improvement notices to protect those herds that are at risk of disease spread from high risk groups within bTB breakdown herds.

3.10 Encourage farmers to improve herd health management

This proposal will also make full use of the new governance structures, outlined above, ensuring knowledge transfer. It is envisaged that tailored biosecurity advice to farmers will be delivered through Private Veterinary Practices, (PVPs) contracts.



The Department will:

- Work with the TBEP, industry, PVPs and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) to develop an integrated approach to improve herd health management on farms, and at marts and agricultural shows.

3.11 Informed purchasing

There is currently no provision for sharing data on individual animal or herd disease status in NI. Provision of bTB (and possibly other disease) risk status information to prospective buyers would be a longer term aim of this recommendation. This would enable the buyer to make an informed decision regarding the health statuses of cattle when buying stock. The farming industry, live stock markets and the TBEP will play a key role in the development of this.

The Department will:

- Invite industry to lead in the introduction of an informed purchasing approach and will work with the TBEP to establish how this could be supported and progressed.

3.12 Farm fragmentation and segregation notices

In Northern Ireland farms are generally organised around a main farm holding, with expansion often occurring through portions of land taken on short term lease known as conacre. Conacre land is usually leased annually with no guarantee of renewal, making it difficult for the farmer leasing the land to justify potentially expensive modifications to improve bio-security, such as installing double fencing or other disease proof barriers.

Farm fragmentation means that there are likely to be regular animal movements from one area to another, with an associated risk of disease spreading more widely than would be the case if the farm was in a single land parcel. It was widely acknowledged in responses to the previous DAERA consultation that current disease rates would potentially delay any moves to immediately implement the use of segregation notices. The introduction of this measure will require further consultation with stakeholders on the detail of any new notices.

These notices would be issued by DAERA staff and would specify where certain animals must be kept within a farm, thereby preventing the movement of high risk animals in breakdown herds to fields adjacent to other herds. There is already provision under brucellosis legislation to require, by legal notice, the segregation within herds of certain animals and also to require their detention in specific fields or housing. These powers are used where there is evidence of direct exposure to significant levels of infection, and compliance is monitored by regular inspection.



The Department will:

- Work with industry to develop and introduce segregation notices as an additional bTB disease control measure.

3.13 Genetic improvement

The selection of bTB resistant breeding material is regarded as a longer term objective in the Eradication Strategy and concerns the use of genetics to help farmers breed cattle that have an improved resistance to bTB. Currently the TB Advantage genetic index is published by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), a UK levy board funded by farmers and growers and some other parts of the supply chain. A relatively new initiative, it is aimed to assist dairy farmers breed bTB resistant cattle. The TBSPG noted the potential benefits of this developing field and the Department proposed that industry should lead to encourage a move towards inclusion of bTB resistance as a desirable trait in the selection of breeding material, supported through CAFRE's education and technology transfer programmes.

The Department will:

- Support industry to encourage a move towards inclusion of bTB resistance as a desirable trait in the selection of breeding material, supported through CAFRE's established education and technology transfer programmes.

3.14 Transport hygiene

Legislation requires that vehicles are cleaned and disinfected immediately after every transport of animals or of any product which could affect animal health, and, if necessary before any new loading of animals, using officially authorised disinfectants. The importance of cleansing and disinfection generally is of paramount importance and farmers should thoroughly clean and disinfect vehicles and equipment after transportation of farm animals.

However, the key issue is ensuring that this legislative requirement is carried out, particularly given the difficulty in providing sufficient Departmental staff to carry out inspections. The Department sought views on the role of industry in ensuring compliance with the legislative requirements to clean and disinfect vehicles. There was broad support for this in consultation responses.

The Department will:

- Work with industry to ensure that vehicles, which make regular or return visits to markets, are properly cleaned and disinfected before and after use, in line with current regulations, to prevent disease spread.



3.15 Actions on Research

This bTB Eradication Strategy is science-led. Scientific evidence underpins all of the recommendations and further research into bTB remains a priority for the Department given the significance of the disease. The Department works closely with the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) on key bTB related research projects which seek to deepen our understanding of the disease. In particular, how to test for it, how to isolate it and how it spreads and how to prevent it, make us and industry better able to eradicate it. We continually engage with colleagues from other jurisdictions to share expertise and awareness of ongoing research.

In 2020/21 the Department's spend on bTB research was approximately £0.45 million. It is very important that the Department's approach to bTB eradication continues to be science-led and utilises robust evidence to eradicate bTB in the NI cattle population. A new Science Strategy for the Department is also in development. This will include a review of how bTB related research is commissioned.

The Department will:

- Facilitate the TBEP's inclusion in the research commissioning process and recognise it as a significant stakeholder in the research programme; and
- Develop procedures that will allow the TBEP to be proportionally involved in the identification, commissioning and dissemination of bTB research.





4. Action on Wildlife

The Department is determined to tackle all factors in the maintenance and spread of this disease. We accept that badgers play a role in the transmission cycle of the disease and we intend to address this as follows.

4.1 Badger intervention

Having taken into account strategic fit, costs and benefits, including sensitivity analyses on such; other non-monetary issues; and risks; the Department will:



- Introduce badger intervention by way of a non-selective cull, carried out by farmer-led companies using controlled shooting.
- This will include farmers paying for deployment expenses, and government paying for authorisation, training (train the trainer approach), mentoring, and advice and monitoring, including any post mortem inspections required.

4.2 Rationale for intervention

The Godfray Report - Bovine TB Strategy Review October 2018; (A strategy for achieving Bovine Tuberculosis Free Status for England:) [Review of government's bovine TB strategy published - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk) concluded that the presence of infected badgers poses a threat to local cattle herds. This conclusion reflected the broad consensus amongst epidemiologists who have studied the disease. Reducing the threat, by culling or non-lethal intervention, will thus help lower the incidence of the disease in cattle.

The Department therefore accepts that some form of intervention is necessary to break the cycle of infection transmission between badgers and cattle, and that action to address this risk must be part of any overall bTB Eradication Strategy. The long-term aim is to vaccinate badgers in order to reduce both intra-species and inter-species spread.

However, the Department believes that it is necessary to reduce the infection load in the badger population first in order to enable follow-up vaccination to be effective. This is consistent with veterinary and scientific advice that badger culling in high cattle TB incidence areas, where badgers are implicated as a reservoir of infection, will reduce the weight of bTB infection in badger populations more quickly than vaccination alone.

It will therefore have a greater and more immediate beneficial impact on the incidence of infection in cattle. On the basis of the independent scientific reports which underpinned their



considerations, the TBSPG recommended that a badger control policy should be implemented to reduce the overall level of infection and should include the culling of badgers in areas of high levels of bTB in cattle.

4.3 Funding arrangements for intervention

The preferred badger removal option, to pave the way for follow-up vaccination, of ‘controlled shooting’ is currently in operation in England, where government and farmers both pay towards its implementation. Government pays for licensing, elements of training, mentoring, advice and monitoring, and farmers pay for ‘on the ground’ deployment expenses.

The low implementation costs published by DEFRA highlight that farmers lead on securing labour for operational requirements across their own and neighbouring land results in a cost efficient approach. In addition to this cost advantage, the preferred option provides an opportunity for farmers to be directly involved in tackling another of the disease transmission risks and, importantly, it offers significant flexibility and scalability. These advantages are critical to tackle a disease such as bTB which will emerge as disease “hot-spots” across different areas of NI over time.

The Department will:

- Give consideration to supporting any capital costs associated with this removal option;
- Pay for administration, elements of training costs, mentoring, advice and monitoring (including post mortem inspections, as required); and
- Farmers will pay for deployment expenses.



5. Finance and Funding

The Department currently pays for all animals compulsory removed under the programme, at an un-capped market rate of 100%. One of the key objectives of the new Strategy is to rebalance the costs of the disease between the public and private sectors and, by so doing, encourage cultural and attitudinal changes, incentivising herd keepers to fully embrace the role they have in protecting their herd from bTB.

5.1 Proposed changes to the compensation cap



The Department proposed that a cap is applied on all animals compulsory removed as part of the bTB programme. We know that the vast majority of herd keepers seek to take all steps possible to keep bTB out of their farm. A cap will ensure that all of industry is encouraged to do the same by removing the unlimited safety net for animals removed, currently met by the tax payer. A cap on compensation paid is currently in place in a number of other bTB eradication programmes included the Republic of Ireland and in Wales.

This approach recognises the challenges facing the industry due to the current high disease rates, acknowledges the consultation responses and the sensitivity of pedigree breeders to a compensation cap.

The proposed cap was £5,000 per animal.

5.2 Proposed reduction in amount of compensation paid

The Department, in autumn 2017, consulted on the proposal to introduce a reduction of 10% to the compensation rate from the current rate of 100% in year one, and a further 15% reduction in year two. This means that compensation would reduce to 90% of market value in year one, and 75% of market value in year two.

The aim of this is to strike a balance between reasonable compensation and cutting costs, while encouraging herd keepers to take all reasonable steps to prevent disease. It seeks to create a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for eradication.

If a £5,000 cap was applied in 2019/20 it would have saved approximately £104,500 and affected less than 0.09% of all herd keepers.



Phasing the introduction of this measure would also assist herd keepers adjust to the new circumstances.

These combined measures would aim to promote equity and fairness across the industry. They aim to provide incentive to enhance biosecurity practices on farm, which will reduce the risk of infection re-entering herds and protect the interests of both wider industry and the taxpayer.

The Department is, however, also aware from stakeholder responses of other forms of compensation change that could be implemented, such as the introduction of a voluntary levy scheme or linking compensation reduction to non-adherence to good biosecurity. The Department is also cognisant that the original TBSPG recommendation was to keep this proposal under review and has taken on board the view of the TBEP with respect to the introduction of this measure only when other elements of the Strategy have been delivered.

The Department is supportive of the need for change to the current compensation system but also acknowledges that there are many pressures impacting on the farming industry as a result of the Covid pandemic and other global events. The Minister has therefore, decided not to introduce the proposed changes at this time but will review them in two years' time following the implementation of the Strategy.





Conclusion

The effects of bTB on the public purse, the devastating effect on farm families and businesses and the potential that high levels of bTB may have on future trade have been highlighted in this document.

It is vital that all aspects of this disease are addressed to enable firstly a reduction in the incidences of disease leading towards the eventual eradication and the achievement of the ultimate goal of bTB free status.

The success of this Programme will depend on the participation and co-operation of the farming industry, veterinary profession and all other stakeholders.

Only then can we safeguard and ensure that Northern Ireland has a healthy, profitable and sustainable farming industry.





Annex 1 - Environmental Assessments

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

As part of the consultation process a SEA screening exercise was completed and the requirement for a full SEA report screened in. It was indicated in the consultation document that a full SEA would be completed and published. The SEA guidance and regulations require that not only are statutory consultees (NIEA and DAFM) consulted but that the public are also offered the opportunity express their opinion.

Following a tender process MCL Consulting were appointed to carry out the necessary environmental assessments. An initial scoping exercise was carried out by MCL Consulting and a number of key stakeholders were invited to respond.

The SEA scoping report was completed on 10 January 2022. The draft report was published on the DAERA web site and comments invited.

The final independent report can be accessed at this link;

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/P2547%20Issue%202%20bTB%20Eradication%20Strategy%20SEA%20-%20DRAFT%20-%20R.A.%20Rev%20final%20%28002%29.pdf>

The reports contain a number of recommendations and proposed mitigations which DAERA will consider and respond to as appropriate and practical. The bTB Eradication Strategy - Environmental Assessment Report - Post Adoption Plan will then be published.

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