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From David Heath CBE MP
Minister of State for Agriculture and Food

Thank you for your letter of 9 November to the Secretary of State on behalf of a number of your constituents about bovine TB.

I shall address your constituents' questions in turn.

Vaccination of cattle against TB is currently prohibited by EU legislation, in place principally because BCG vaccination of cattle can interfere with the tuberculin skin test which is the recognised primary diagnostic test for TB in cattle.

Defra has discussed with the European Commission the steps that would be necessary to change the current legislation and allow TB vaccination of cattle combined with use of a test to differentiate infected from vaccinated animals (so-called "DIVA" test – see below) to be used as a trade test. One of the most difficult barriers will be to get international validation of the DIVA test, which will depend on being able to satisfy the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), on the basis of solid scientific evidence, that the test is effective and safe. That process is in train, but is likely to take years, rather than months, to complete. AHVLA's data has been shared with other OIE reference laboratories and with the EU Reference Laboratory for bovine TB for their views.

An opportunity to provide a future legal basis for vaccination of cattle against TB is likely to be created by the proposed new European Animal Health Law, which is currently under consideration by the European Commission.

It has always been the case that meat (passed as fit for human consumption) from TB test positive cattle can enter the human food chain. Stringent post-mortem controls, that adhere to requirements set out EU food hygiene legislation, operate in GB slaughterhouses. All bovine carcasses (and offal) are examined, by Food Standard Agency official inspectors, for evidence of disease. Where signs of generalised TB infection are present or TB lesions are discovered in more than one organ or region of the carcass the entire carcass and offal are condemned. If a single TB lesion is found, only the affected part of the carcass is destroyed.



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In the UK, the risk of humans contracting M. bovis infection from animals is very low due to the current control measures. In rare undetected TB cases, M.bovis organisms can be excreted in milk but are killed by pasteurisation. Similarly, any undetected M. bovis organisms in carcasses will be killed by thoroughly cooking meat.

TB is a serious animal health problem and is devastating for affected farmers. Around 26,000 cattle were slaughtered in England in 2011 as part of controlling the disease. The problem is particularly acute in west and south-west England, and is worsening. The cost of the disease to the taxpayer is huge and is set to top £1 billion in England over the next ten years if we do not take more action.

We already have a robust set of measures in place to tackle cattle to cattle transmission, including compulsory testing, slaughter of infected animals and movement restrictions on infected herds. As set out in the Bovine TB Eradication Programme we are always looking to improve on these measures. I have recently announced strengthened controls that will come into force from 1 January 2013. This includes changes to the surveillance testing regime and cattle movement controls. However, we also need to accept that we are at the point where cattle measures alone are not enough to prevent the spread of disease in the worst affected areas. In order to stop it spreading further we need to address the issue of infected badgers passing the disease to cattle. We know that no country in the world that has a wildlife reservoir of the disease has successfully eradicated TB in cattle without addressing its presence in the wildlife population. The Government is therefore introducing a carefully managed and science led policy of badger control, as part of a package of measures to tackle TB in cattle.

We are not aware of any country in the world which has successfully controlled TB in cattle without addressing its presence in the wildlife population.

In September 2010, Defra published a consultation document entitled 'Bovine Tuberculosis: The Government's approach to tackling the disease and consultation on a badger control policy'. This document included information about countries and regions outside Great Britain with a known wildlife reservoir i.e. where the wildlife population can sustain bovine TB infection on its own. Details on a number of scientific studies on bovine TB carried out in other countries were also included. The consultation document can be found on the Defra website at: <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/tb-control-measures/100915-tb-control-measures-condoc.pdf>



DAVID HEATH CBE MP

