

BOVINE TB

Decrease in bovine TB in the pilot badger cull zones

DESPITE my earlier letter (*VR*, January 10, 2015, vol 176, p 54) suggesting that the badger culling results for Gloucestershire were acceptable, we are aware that there remains a section of the community that is, perhaps reasonably, still concerned that an ineffective cull might lead to an increase, rather than a decrease, in bovine TB.

We have therefore looked for evidence of any increase in bovine TB in the cull zone. Data from two vet practices, involving over 4000 cattle, from a total of approximately 15,000 cattle in the Gloucestershire cull area, were used to compare whole-herd TB tests in early/mid-2013 with data from the same herds tested 18 months later in late 2014/early 2015. The number of reactors fell from 28 (0.56 per cent) in early/mid-2013 to just five (0.12 per cent) in late 2014/early 2015, with a similar reduction (26 to two) in inconclusive reactors.

This was a simple practice survey. The

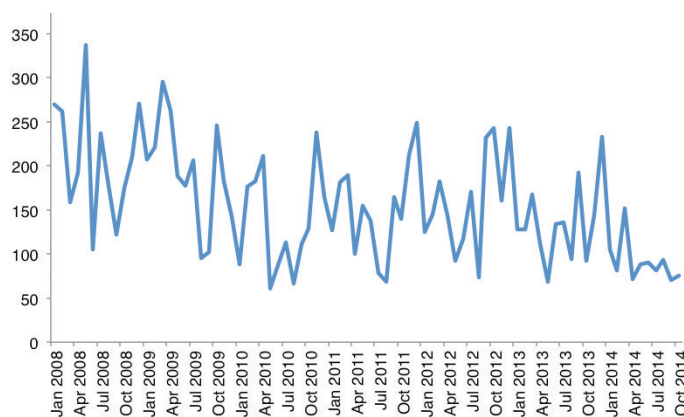


FIG 1: Bovine TB reactors culled in Gloucestershire

population selected included all herds within the cull zone tested by the two practices in the specified time period; it did not include data for herds tested by Defra, herds that changed vet practice during that time period, or herds that had their annual test outside of the selected time period. We are fully aware that we have looked at only a short time period, and that disease levels will fluctuate.

The incidence of bovine TB in Gloucestershire has been slowing falling from a peak of 2518 animals slaughtered in 2008 to 1630 in 2013 (Defra 2013), a fall of just under 10 per cent per annum, although much

of this decrease could be associated with an 8 per cent fall in the total cattle numbers in the county over the same period, from 130,000 cattle in 2008 to 120,000 in 2013. The steady decline in reactors is shown in Fig 1. Data for October 2014 to January 2015 are not yet available. Note that there was a similar but shorter reduction in the number of reactors in [May to September 2010](#).

The recent decrease in reactors has been so dramatic that practice staff responsible for the administration of TB test results have commented on the obvious reduction in the number of DNA samples being sent off.

Defra statistics show that there were 1630 skin test reactors slaughtered in Gloucestershire in 2013. Assuming an average compensation payment of £1000, the recent five-fold reduction in the number of reactors, if sustained, will reduce this by 1300 payments, a saving of £1.3 million per year for Gloucestershire alone. With a big reduction in the number of herds under movement restriction, there will also be a considerable saving to Defra from herds requiring 60-day testing.

A similar decrease in the level of bovine TB has been seen in the Somerset cull area, where there has been a three-fold reduction in the number of herds under movement restriction.

We would therefore like to allay the fears of those who allege that the current cull will lead to an increase in bovine TB. The results so far suggest entirely the opposite. We would expect to see further reductions in the future.

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Reference

DEFRA (2013) Structure of the agricultural industry: survey notes and guidance. www.gov.uk/structure-of-the-agricultural-industry-survey-notes-and-guidance. Accessed February 16, 2015

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