

P-06-1332 Fund vaccine research to protect red squirrels from deadly Squirrelpox virus, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 10.10.23

Dear Mr Sargeant

Squirrelpox has, and will continue, to devastate red squirrel populations in Wales unless we have a vaccine. The urgency of the matter was clear in the Senedd debate with strong cross-party support for red squirrel conservation. I would like to thank you and your colleagues for taking this forward.

I have made a few brief points below which I hope will assist your committee in its considerations.

Vaccine feasibility study

There are a large numbers of questions about vaccine which we need answered. The Minister sensibly mentioned many of these: cost, timetable, utility, method of delivery, attenuation or other research steps. My petition was of course not wedded to Wildlife Ark Trust (WAT) attenuated approach mentioned, as I was careful to leave the door open to alternative routes e.g. Pirbright Institute.

I would therefore ask that the Petitions Committee consider getting in touch with WAT and Pirbright Labs respectively about current or potential research proposals.

Red squirrels and pox in Mid Wales

The Minister mentioned that in Mid Wales, the Wildlife Trusts (Wales) had never recorded a case of squirrelpox. However, only a small proportion of infected animals are recorded, even in major disease outbreaks in habitats where finding bodies is relatively easy e.g. Formby (Lancs) & Bangor (Gwynedd). In the upland spruce forest of Mid Wales my understanding is that only a handful of dead reds have been found in 20 years: one brought in dead by a cat and one a road casualty. Thus it is quite baffling that anyone can claim with confidence the relative importance of any cause of regional mortality, let alone that viral disease outbreaks have not occurred in the forests.

Importantly, some dead red squirrels only show minor localised lesions, and in these cases infection could very easily be overlooked where (as in mid Wales) animals are monitored at a distance using automatic cameras. Finally, I was contacted by the Mid Wales project in 2022 lamenting the lack of red squirrel sightings and apparent inexplicable declines in numbers to a point where serious consideration was being given to releasing animals to boost numbers.

The Wildlife Trusts (Wales) are of course entitled to provide their position regarding Squirrelpox. However, I would ask the petitions committee to consider the peer reviewed scientific publications that paint a very different and grave picture of the viral threat posed by grey to red squirrels in Wales.

Kind regards

Dr Craig Shuttleworth