

## Bovine TB Testing

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 21 Mawrth 2017  
Petitions Committee | 21 March 2017

### Research Briefing:

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Petition number: P-05-747

Petition title: Bovine TB Testing

Text of petition: We, the undersigned, object to the proposal by the Welsh Assembly, to reduce the interval for routine TB testing of cattle in designated areas of Wales from 12 months to 6 months. Action petitioned for: withdrawal of this proposal, and maintain the status quo.

### Background

Bovine TB (bovine tuberculosis) is an infectious and chronic disease caused by *Mycobacterium bovis* and usually affects the lungs and lymph nodes of cattle. In most cases infected cattle are able to transmit the disease before they show signs of being unwell, which may be many months after they are infected. Controlling TB therefore depends on detecting and eliminating infected cattle as early as possible.

The [Welsh Government's TB Dashboard \(PDF 1.2MB\)](#) reports the following figures for Wales for Quarter 3 of 2016:

- 95.3% of Welsh herds were TB free;
- 11, 675 "live herds" in Wales;
- 136 new incidents of TB;
- 205 TB incidents closed;
- 547 open TB incidents (69 fewer than in the previous quarter); and
- 1,894 disclosed animals testing positive to the tuberculin skin test ("reactors").

There was a peak in new herd incidences in 2008–9 with a general downward trend since then. The number of cattle slaughtered has also declined since 2009, but has been increasing since 2013. The [latest statistics for Wales](#) show that in the 12 months to November 2016 9,954 cattle were slaughtered as a result of the disease (compared to 7,658 in the 12 months to November 2015), while 689 herds suffered from a new breakdown (compared to 852 to November 2015).

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs [in a written statement](#) (16 January 2016) attributed the rise in the number of cattle slaughtered because of bovine TB as being due to the increased use of the gamma–interferon blood tests. This gamma test is used to complement the other main cattle screening test – the skin test. The gamma test has a high level of sensitivity and is designed to improve detection and elimination. The Cabinet Secretary stated “t is my aim to keep the number of cattle slaughtered because of TB to the minimum...We will continue to use the gamma test strategically where we can make the best use of it to complement our other controls”.

## Welsh Government Consultation

The Welsh Government has recently consulted on '[A Refreshed TB Eradication Programme](#)'. The consultation ran from 18 October 2016 to 10 January 2017. Amongst a suite of proposals, the Welsh Government set out its new regionalised approach to tackling bovine TB. In the consultation the Welsh Government set out that a regional approach would allow it to:

- Apply different controls in different areas depending on the disease situation and risk in that area; and
- Set realistic targets by which each area can progress towards achieving Officially TB Free (OTF) status.

The consultation document stated that Wales can be divided into three broad TB incidence categories; low, intermediate and high (see figure 1 below taken from the consultation document). The criteria for each area are:

- Low TB Area: The area where less than 0.2% of herds have had a TB incident in a year;
- Intermediate TB Area: The areas where less than 5% but more than 0.2% of herds have had a TB incident in a year; and
- High TB Area: The areas where more than 5% of herds have had a TB incident in a year.

# Wales TB Regionalisation

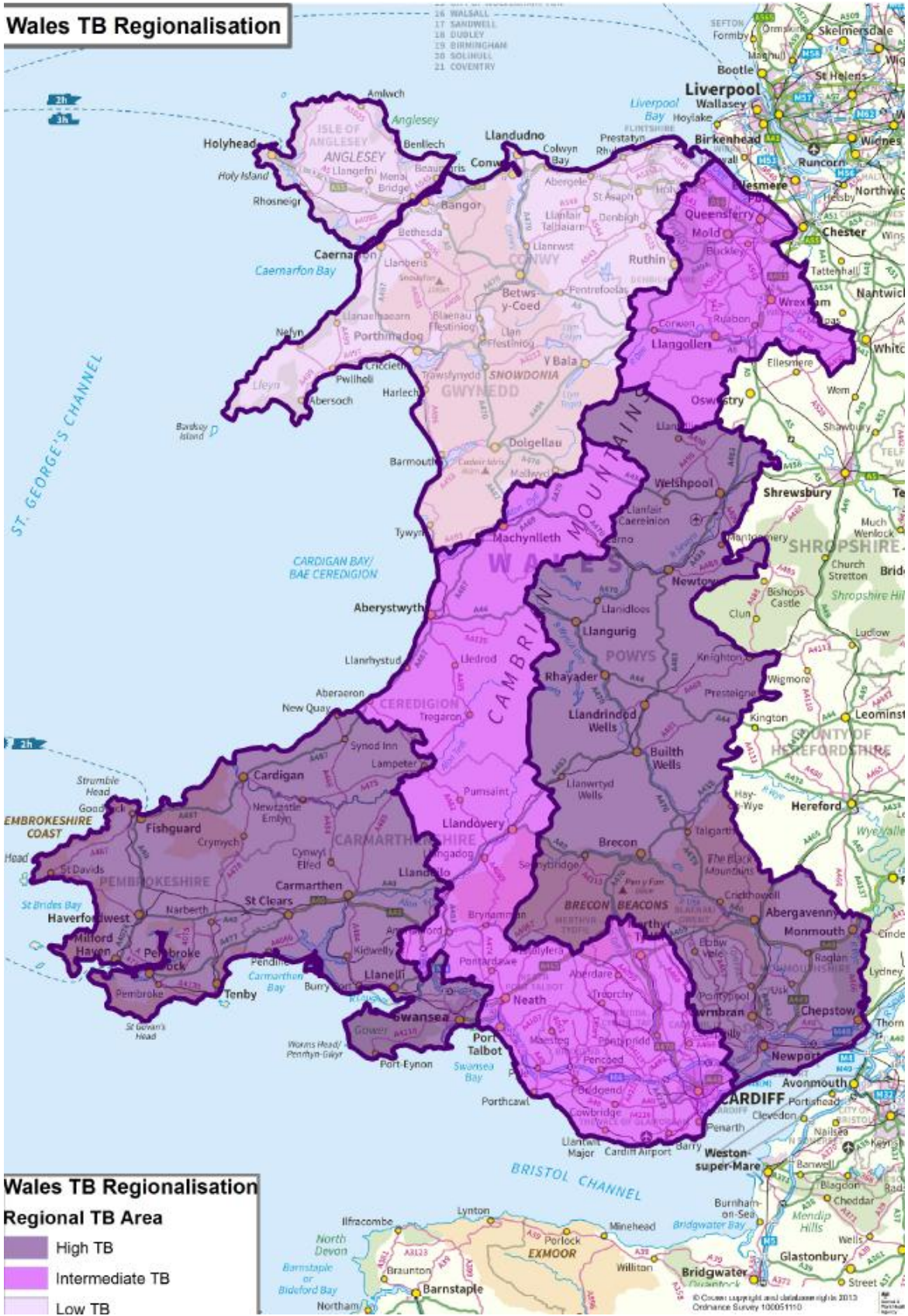


Figure 1: Welsh Government proposed regional TB areas  
 Source: Welsh Government Consultation on A Refreshed TB Eradication Programme

In evidence to the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee on 14 December 2016, the Cabinet Secretary stated that the regionalisation concept was not being consulted upon as it is an evidence-based approach.

In relation to **cattle measures**, the consultation states that these are aimed at limiting and mitigating against the spread of infection between cattle. The proposed surveillance and control measures, e.g. movement testing and restrictions, can be seen in the table below that summarises all proposed action in each of the three TB areas.

	Low TB Area	Intermediate TB Area(s)	High TB Area(s)
<b>Surveillance testing</b>	Annual (high risk herds- 6 monthly)	Annual (high risk herds- 6 monthly)	Six monthly
<b>Pre-Movement Testing (PrMT)</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Post-Movement Testing (PoMT)</b>	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Mandatory Interferon Gamma Testing (IFN-y)</b>	New breakdowns	New breakdowns	Chronic breakdowns
<b>Standard Inconclusive Reactor (IRs) (in OTFW<sup>1</sup>)</b>	Re-tested using IFN-y, clear tested animals restricted to their herd	Re-tested using IFN-y, clear tested animals restricted to their herd	Slaughtered as reactors
<b>Severe IRs (in OTFW)</b>	2 x IRs slaughtered as reactors	2 x IRs slaughtered as reactors	2 x IRs slaughtered as reactors, clear tested restricted to their herd
<b>Breakdown management</b>	No change	No change	Clearing test not to be used as PrMT

<sup>1</sup> Officially TB Free Withdrawn

<b>Biosecurity Improvement Notices</b>	No change	No change	OTFW breakdowns
<b>Approved Finishing Unit (AFUs)</b>	Not permitted	Indoor only	Indoor only
<b>Exempt Finishing Unit (EFUs)</b>	Indoor only or not permitted	Indoor only	Indoor only
<b>Cymorth TB (Support for affected farmers)</b>	Breakdown farms (one off visit for all)	Breakdown farms	All farms
<b>Badgers</b>	Monitor the level of infection	Encourage vaccination (when available)	Explore and develop ways to break the transmission cycle between cattle and badgers where it can be demonstrated badgers are contributing to the problem in chronic herd breakdowns.

**Figure 2: Welsh Government proposals for regional approach**

Source: Annex B of the Welsh Government TB consultation document

The frequency of testing proposed in the consultation varies depending on whether it is a low, intermediate or high TB area. For low and intermediate areas the consultation proposes annual surveillance testing (and for high risk herds, six monthly testing). For high TB areas surveillance testing will be on a six monthly basis. The consultation sets out that this proposed approach is based on risk and the epidemiological evidence of the disease situation in each area.

## Welsh Government action

The *Tuberculosis (Wales) Order 2010 (as amended)*, made under the [Animal Health Act 1981](#), confers powers relating to the prevention of the spread of bovine TB in cattle, including provision for testing and movement of animals.

In her letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs set out the rationale for the proposed new approach to TB testing in certain parts of Wales:

In areas of high TB incidence and in herds which are of higher risk of becoming infected, it is of paramount importance to get a step ahead of the disease, find it quickly and stop it spreading, both within the herd and to other herds. **A stringent and robust testing regime is, therefore, an essential component of an eradication programme.** That is why I felt it was necessary to consult on an **enhanced routine testing regime in those herds which are at greatest risk of having a TB breakdown.**

The Welsh Government is yet to publish its summary of consultation responses, or a new TB eradication strategy. The Cabinet Secretary says that she will be making a statement on the refreshed TB eradication programme in **early May**, having carefully considered the consultation responses.

## National Assembly for Wales action

The Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee has recently undertaken an inquiry into Bovine TB, holding [evidence sessions](#) in November and December 2016, and is due to report in the Summer Term. In her [evidence to the Committee](#), Dr Malla Hovi from the UK Government Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) set out that in 2015 it changed its approach to testing in its Low Risk, High Risk and Edge Areas, outlining that different areas have different testing regimes:

We introduced successfully at the beginning of 2015 six-monthly testing in some of the high-risk parts of the edge, and we've seen very beneficial impacts of that six-monthly testing.

...in low-risk areas we're only doing four-yearly routine surveillance testing, exactly like Scotland did before they went official TB free [...] Two independent universities modelled the testing regime or the surveillance regime, and they came to a conclusion, both independently, that there was no disease control benefit from extending the annual testing across low-risk areas.

There was a [Plenary debate on Bovine TB](#) on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2016. The debate called on the Welsh Government:

...to take decisive action to tackle bovine TB by committing to use the most effective measures to control and eradicate bovine TB and **ensuring that testing and movement restrictions are proportionate to the disease status of an area.**

In response to the debate, the Cabinet Secretary attributed the reduction in TB breakdowns to, amongst other aspects, better targeting of testing:

I support the motion proposed today, and believe the only way to tackle this issue is to use a combination of the most appropriate and effective measures, proportionate the different risk areas in Wales. All measures applied must be supported by firm evidence and veterinary risk assessment, focusing on all routes of transmission, not just transmission from wildlife reservoirs, which seems to receive all the attention.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.