

STATEMENT BY THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

TITLE Bovine Tuberculosis – Next Steps

DATE 20 June 2017

BY Lesley Griffiths, Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs

I would like to begin by thanking the members of the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee for their report on our TB Eradication Programme. I formally responded to the report this morning and was particularly pleased to see the Committee's recommendations were in line with our proposals which were consulted on late last year.

Building on progress made over the last nine years, many of you know the significant financial and social impact bovine TB has on farming families, their businesses and the rural economy. It is important we continue to tackle this disease to safeguard the future of the industry and to protect public and animal health. The consultation attracted almost a thousand representations and I want to thank all those who responded. Many agreed with the need to take a more regional approach and so later this year I will establish Low, Intermediate and High TB Areas.

Over the last few years real progress has been made. The number of new incidents has fallen by over 40% since its peak in 2009 and is now the lowest it has been in 12 years. Through increased testing, we are finding infected cattle at an earlier stage and now around 5% of herds have TB. The regional approach will build on what we have already achieved and accelerate progress towards a TB free Wales.

Today I have published the Wales TB Eradication Programme document and first Delivery Plan which provides the details of evidence based controls to be applied to each region.

The low TB area in North Wales is where the disease has not become established. Here, becoming TB free is within our grasp in the short to medium term. TB free status will boost trade opportunities and mean herds require less regular TB testing, reducing costs for farmers and Government.

Our evidence shows cattle movements into the area are the main driver of disease which does occur and so, from 1 October, post-movement testing will be introduced. This will help protect the area by identifying infected animals at the earliest opportunity, before they go on to infect others. The evidence shows movement of cattle from neighbouring higher TB areas is one of the main drivers of disease in the intermediate areas. Post-movement testing will, therefore, be introduced to the intermediate areas late next year.

The priority for the high TB areas is to continue to reduce the number of TB breakdowns and the severity of each case. In the consultation we asked for feedback on a proposal for herd testing to be carried out every six months instead of annually. Six monthly testing has been beneficial in the Intensive Action Area, where this more frequent testing finds 22% of all breakdowns. It has also been successfully used in eradication programmes in other countries. I know from my discussions with farmers, however, it can be inconvenient and practically difficult to gather cattle from pasture in the summer months. This is why I have decided six monthly testing will only be required for those herds which are the highest risk of becoming infected. We are gathering the evidence needed to identify these herds and so, for now, annual testing will remain for all Wales.

Farmers told us they want herd TB status information made available so they can make a judgement on the risk of the cattle they are buying. We know Risk Based Trading schemes have made a significant contribution to TB eradication in New Zealand and Australia.

Providing herd-level information will be one of the most important parts of the Programme going forward, complementing our regional policies. We have made a start by grant funding livestock markets to update their equipment to receive and display TB information. In the longer-term, only a mandatory system will make sure cattle sellers provide TB information at the point of sale and we will explore ways this can be introduced.

The Cattle Health Certification Standards TB voluntary health schemes, known as CHeCS, will also play a pivotal role by allowing herds to demonstrate they are a lower risk even if they are in a high TB area. This will help buyers minimise the risk of introducing the disease and participating

herds classified as the lowest risk will be exempt from some of our controls. I urge Members to help me encourage farmers to sign-up to a scheme and ask for TB information of the cattle they are buying, no matter where they come from.

A key element of our approach to disease eradication is to deal with TB in long standing and recurrent TB breakdowns. Some of these 'chronic' TB breakdowns have been under TB restrictions for many years. Eliminating disease in these herds will significantly reduce the costs and implications to the taxpayer, herd owners and neighbouring herds.

We are putting in place tailored action plans for chronic breakdowns with measures specifically aimed at clearing up infection. In some of these chronic breakdowns, badgers may be identified as part of the problem and, unless we accept these herds remaining persistently infected, we must find ways to break the cycle of infection between badgers and cattle. We are considering a range of options to do this, including where necessary cage-trapping and humanely killing infected badgers.

This is a new approach and is not a repeat of the reactive culling previously used in England. The trap, test and removal operations being planned will be restricted to those breakdowns where investigations indicate badger infection is a key driver of the disease persisting. We will also only remove test positive badgers.

In areas where it can be proved badgers are not contributing to the disease, we will continue with cattle specific measures, including increased biosecurity.

Along with these new measures we also need to be prudent with our budgets, especially with the future loss of European funding. It is important we prevent slaughtered animals being overvalued because it increases the cost to the taxpayer. I am concerned our average compensation payments are 60% higher than in England so I am reducing the compensation cap to £5,000 and reviewing our compensation system. I will look at those used in other countries to inform any changes.

I fully appreciate just how distressing and debilitating TB is for farmers. My message to them is things are getting better and through working together we can achieve our mutual aim of eradicating this disease.