

TB Discussion in the Veterinary Press

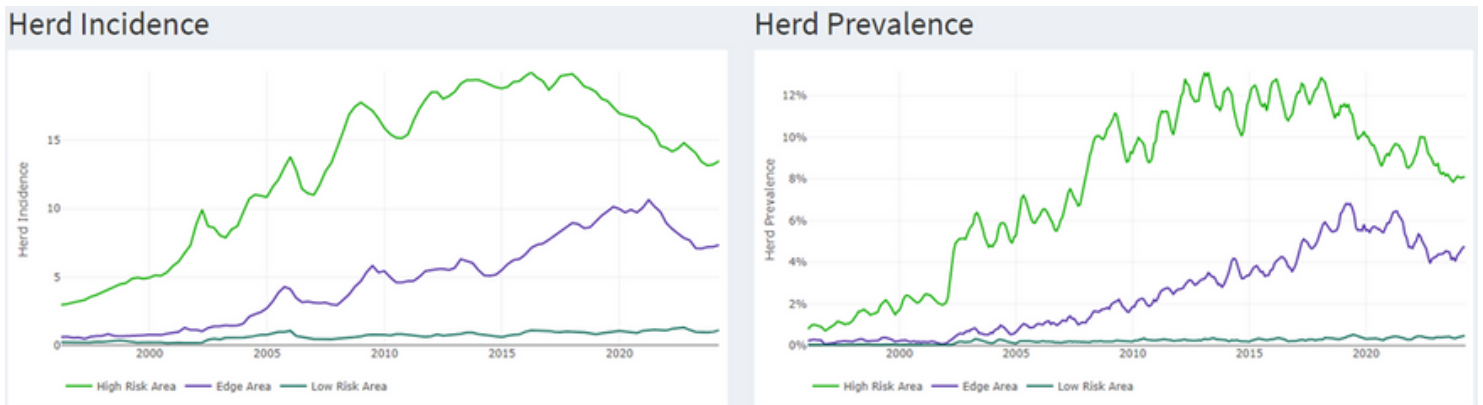
November 24

'It is impossible to meet our officially bTB-free targets with the current testing policy'

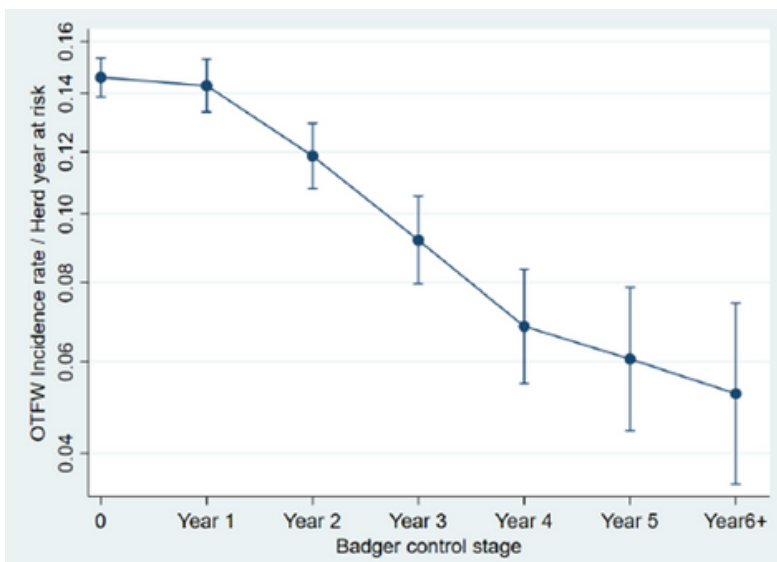
The above statement was recently made in an opinion piece submitted to the Vet Record (Journal of the British Veterinary Association) by Professor Neil Watt MRCVS (Veterinary Pathologist at the University of Edinburgh and Co-founder of MV Diagnostics) and Keith Cutler MRCVS (Veterinary Surgeon at Synergy Farm Health and Director of Cattle Health Certification Standards).

The pair argue that DEFRA's aim of achieving officially bovine tuberculosis (bTB)-free status for England by 2038 is unlikely to be met without drastic change to testing and policy.

APHA have admitted themselves, albeit quietly, that their policy is not quite up to scratch: a report from the 2023 Official Veterinarian conference stated, 'Bovine TB eradication targets may not be met.' Many who have attended TB meetings will have seen that in public, the party line from DEFRA is that their TB control policies are robust and effective. Looking at the www.tbhub.co.uk interactive bovine TB statistics dashboard, you might think that their claims of a successful eradication plan are not completely farfetched. The data does show some improvement across England:



Other recent reports have also indicated that much of the reductions in the incidence of **OTF-Withdrawn** (OTF-W) breakdowns (**TB outbreaks where Visible Lesions are found in reactors**) can be attributed to the badger culls:



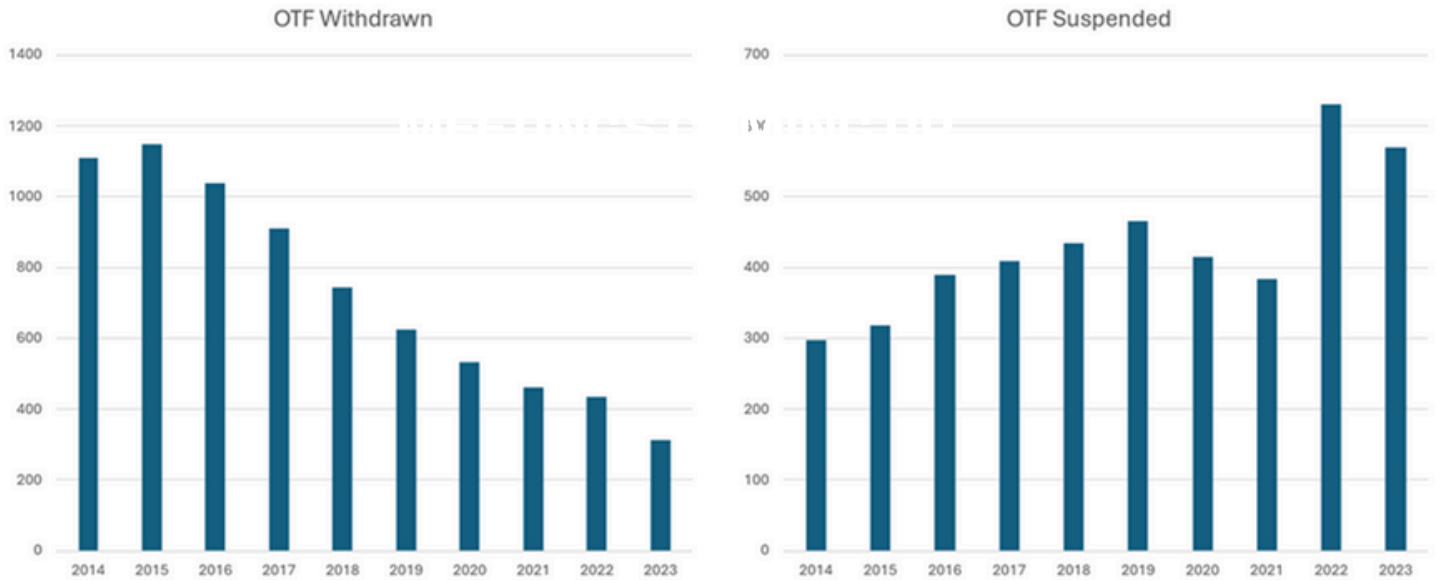
The analysis shown to the left found a dramatic decrease in the incidence of OTF-W herds across England. The paper states that herd incidence rate of TB reduced by 56% up to the fourth year of badger cull interventions, with the largest reductions in the second and third years.

So, we have a reasonable amount of positive sounding datasets and reports from DEFRA and the scientific community, and a lot of discussion around these figures in the veterinary press. **But is this completely accurate and reliable?**

Many assessments of policy success are based on reductions in disease where **Visible Lesions (VLs)** are found. This in reality is not reflective of the disease picture across the country as VLs are **not found** in the vast majority of TB reactors.

Of the **21,943 TB reactors** that were slaughtered in England over the 12 months leading up to June 2024, **only 364 had VLs**. This means the graphs and datasets discussing OTF-W incidence and prevalence commonly used by DEFRA and APHA to support their policies, do not provide a completely accurate portrayal of what is actually happening.

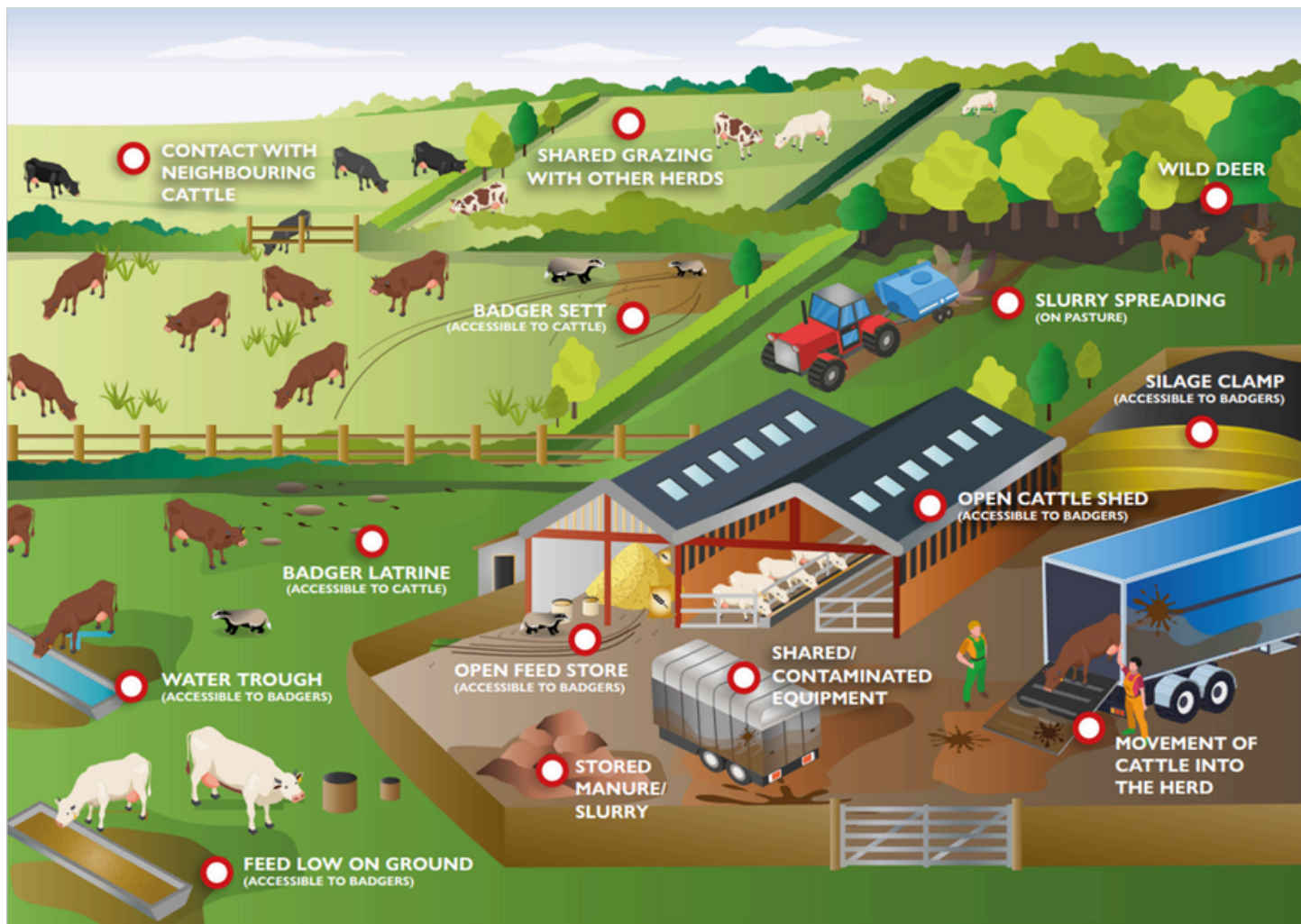
If we were to compare the changes in new herd breakdowns in Devon, Cornwall and Dorset (which represent over 33% of all new breakdowns in England) over the last 10 years, we see the graphs below: Thanks to Dick Sibley MRCVS for bringing this analysis to my attention.



There is a slightly negative trend in the overall (OTF-W and OTF-S combined) incidence across these three counties, but the apparent shift in majority from OTF-W to OTF-S breakdowns cannot be ignored. Especially when trying to give an honest review of TB policy. When only the OTF-W graph is used to show how brilliant current policy is, whilst the OTF-S graph (which suggests policy is not quite as effective as some would want us to believe) is ignored, nobody wins. A similar story is seen closer to home across Gloucestershire and Wiltshire as we see the number of **OTF-W herds decreasing and OTF-S herds increasing**. Frustratingly, DEFRA still use the terms 'Confirmed outbreak' for OTF-W and 'Non-confirmed outbreak' for OTF-S. This is misleading because we know the skin test carries a 1 in 5000 false positive rate, meaning when it identifies a Reactor, the result can be trusted regardless of the presence of lesions.

The Labour government has unfortunately made it clear that it will be sticking to its manifesto pledge to phase out badger culling as part of their wildlife control strategy, replace it with badger vaccination. I think the recent badger cull review figure of a 56% reduction is a touch elaborate because the study did not take into account OTF-S herds. This is not to say that I think the culls were ineffective. I firmly believe that wildlife control is an **essential part** of reducing TB, and culling **clearly reduces disease risk** in a cost-effective and timely manner. Depending on how the numbers are presented can dramatically influence our perception of what control measures work best. This is something that the media and public miss when presented with black and white figures (excuse the pun) and as political parties argue we must promote TB policies that encompass all areas of risk in equal measure:

<p>Risk Factor 1 Minimise TB risk from purchased cattle</p>	<p>Risk Factor 2 Minimise TB risk from contact with cattle in other herds</p>	<p>Risk Factor 3 Minimise TB risk from your own animals</p>
<p>Risk Factor 4 Minimise the spread of TB through muck or slurry</p>	<p>Risk Factor 5 Reduce TB risk to and from badgers</p>	<p>Risk Factor 6 Have a TB test failure contingency plan</p>



If you have been thinking about your **own herds TB risk**, Dr Andrew Robertson (PhD on badger ecology and behaviour, University of Exeter) has produced this useful infographic that provides further information. This can be accessed on his website through this link: www.tbknowledgeexchange.co.uk/tb/

Will we see change?

I believe the policy makers, although well-meaning, do not appreciate the brutal game of Russian roulette herds based in the High Risk and Edge Areas experience when testing. The performance of different TB control measures can be skewed and misinterpreted, and unfortunately it is ultimately cost that governs the rules we have to follow. Much debate has been had across the veterinary industry on what we as vets can do better to assist farmers in combatting TB. Amongst private vets delivering TB testing across the country there is a common thread: **TB is not improving as it should and it will not improve until TB policy changes** to provide more control and choice to industry.

This is because **Officially** Tuberculosis Free does not mean **Actually** Tuberculosis Free. It is often the case that herds declared clear **retain infected animals** within the population because they are **missed by our tests**. At farm level, DEFRA's main tools to monitor the disease are the skin test, (flexible-extended) interferon-gamma test, IDEXX M. bovis antibody test, slaughterhouse inspection and culture/PCR. This may sound like an impressive stable of diagnostics, but put simply, they do not work well enough to get ahead of the disease (check your recycling bins for previous newsletters where I have discussed their limitations, namely a **lack of test sensitivity and appropriate/timely use!**)

We can all do more to help government recognise how deeply embedded TB is in specific parts of the country. **The Pembrokeshire Project**, an on-going Welsh study that is using the Enferplex blood test to help a small number of persistently infected herds identify infection and risk, is reported to have found staggering levels of infection (no official report yet but I'm told **20-50% herd prevalence** has been found on many of the study farms). This is in contrast to where skin, gamma and slaughterhouse inspection have indicated comparatively small numbers of infected animals over a long period of time. We ourselves have experienced this as a number of our herds have engaged with extended testing strategies similar to The Pembrokeshire Project. This has provided a more accurate disease picture on farms at an individual cow level, and has empowered the herds to make **informed management, breeding and culling decisions** that effectively reduce disease risk **without damaging the farm business**.


New approaches that provide opportunities for farmers and their private vets in specific cases to make their own decisions on what tests are used, in what order and on what animals will provide better control of the disease on farm. This format has been shown to work well on dairy farms working to reduce Johnes disease, a close relative to TB. **Encouragingly**, this has been discussed in government, with the TB Partnership recently completing a report titled, Options for improving the sensitivity of testing in bTB in cattle. The report proposed creating a voluntary enhanced testing scheme with the aim of **giving greater responsibility for decision making and delivery to farmers and private vets** and providing further funded options for deploying a choice of additional tests in eligible herds.

If you haven't already taken advantage of a **free TB Advisory Service (TBAS) visit**, I would urge you to contact the practice. We can discuss the risks specific to your farm and arrange communications with your APHA case vet that will provide substantial assistance when faced with an outbreak. APHA view farms that have completed a TBAS visit favourably and this can help form a constructive working relationship with government officials, something that can be a challenge!

'It is impossible to meet our officially bTB-free targets with the current testing policy'

So to finish, I think Neil Watt and Keith Cutler are absolutely right with the above statement. We may find ourselves going round in circles at present, but the change we all want to see is achievable and I remain optimistic.

Please consider booking a TBAS visit and if you have any questions, frustrations or disagree with any of the points I have made, please get in touch.

TBAS Follow-Up Report	
TBAS Adviser Ben Sellick Visited on 22 nd June 2023	
 Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs	
Recommendations	
Question	Answer
Recommendation made 1	TB - Have a Johnes like management plan for TB
Details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Priority set: High - Est. costs: Time only - Target completion date: 15 Jun 2023
Notes when recommendation made	See below - Reaction Report for details
Progress made	Completed
Why not completed?	
Notes on progress made	Bovine Reaction Report being used to inform breeding and culling decisions.
Actual cost of changes	£0
Hours taken to complete changes (to the nearest hour)	1
Recommendation made 2	Badgers - Consider using alternative sources of minerals, for example boluses
Details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Priority set: High - Est. costs: £500-£1000 - Target completion date: 15 Jun 2023
Notes when recommendation made	Remove mineral licks from grazing platform and continue bolus/drench
Progress made	Completed
Why not completed?	
Notes on progress made	Mineral buckets removed from grazing fields.
Actual cost of changes	£500
Hours taken to complete changes (to the nearest hour)	1
Recommendation made 3	Badgers - Use badger-proofed water troughs
Details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Priority set: High - Est. costs: £1000-£5000 - Target completion date: 15 Jun 2023
Notes when recommendation made	Also identify setts and latrines accessible to cattle at pasture and fence-off
Progress made	Completed
Why not completed?	

TBAS Follow-Up Report	
TBAS Adviser Ben Sellick Visited on 22 nd June 2023	
 Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs	
Recommendations review (continued)	
Question	Answer
Notes on progress made	Alternative water system in place that should present a low risk of badger use - place wildlife camera on water troughs to assess level of activity.
Actual cost of changes	£500
Hours taken to complete changes (to the nearest hour)	1
Recommendation made 4	Business - Enquire about setting up an Isolation Unit
Details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Priority set: Medium - Est. costs: £1000-£5000 - Target completion date: 15 Sep 2023 - Challenging
Notes when recommendation made	When the farm has regained OTF status it may be possible to set up an isolation unit. This will receive breeding bulls and protect their OTF status. Please see link for details: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/when-to-use-a-badger-proofed-water-trough
Progress made	Intend to start soon
Why not completed?	Ongoing long term project
Notes on progress made	
Actual cost of changes	£0
Hours taken to complete changes (to the nearest hour)	0
Further notes	



Wishing you all the best,
Ben





Christmas stocking filler -
Charity calendar -£10 each - all
proceeds split between FCN & DPJ
Foundation.

MEETINGS COMING UP

Sheep meeting

It's beginning to get to that time of year, especially with all the rain we've had, when we can see more lameness problems with wet conditions underfoot. Hence the focus of this meeting will be on lameness.

We'll be discussing lameness causes, control and treatment / management including footbathing and Footvax.

Food will be provided.

7pm on Tuesday 12th November @ Gupshill Manor, GL20 5SY

and

7pm on Wednesday 20th November @ Old Royal Ship, Luckington, SN16 6PA

If you'd like to come along, please
email: farm@georgevetgroup.co.uk or
Phone: 01666 823035 for catering



COMPASSION RESPECT INTEGRITY SUSTAINABILITY PROGRESSION CARE

T: 01666 823035 Option"1" for visits or enquiries, "2" for medicines, "3" for TB testing