

Council Meeting – 8 July 2013

Notice of Motion – Badger Cull

Introduction

The following notice of motion has been submitted by Councillors Councillor Smith, C. Bott and P. Bott:

“Walsall Council calls on the Government to stop the cull of badgers on the following grounds:

- Over 70% of the badger population in large areas of the country will be killed, many of them healthy and many of them injured and suffering before death as a result of being shot.
- The method of free-shooting badgers could cause severe stress, suffering and pain to many thousands of badgers.
- Independent scientific studies have shown that culling would be of little help in reducing Bovine Tuberculosis and even suggest that it could make things worse in some areas.
- The go-ahead for the killing of badgers might provide an excuse for a general “free for all” attack on badgers, wherever their habitats may be.”

Background Information

Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) is a chronic infectious disease that can affect a broad range of mammals, including, cattle, badgers, deer, dogs, cats, horses, goats and humans, but rarely sheep. Once an animal has contracted bTB, the disease spreads to other animals in the same group or herd when healthy animals come into contact with exhalations or excretions from infected ones.

In the UK, infected cattle are culled, with a farm outbreak costing an average of £30,000. In 2011, about 26,000 cattle were slaughtered because of bTB, at a cost of £100 million to the taxpayer.

The disease is mostly concentrated in south-west England. It is thought to have re-emerged because of farmers across the country having to buy new stock following the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak.

Badgers were first identified as carriers of bTB 30 years ago. In 1997, an independent scientific body concluded that badgers made an important contribution to the spread of bTB between herds of cattle. The government ordered an independently run series of trials, known as the Randomised Badger Culling Trials (RBCT), in which 11,000 badgers in selected locations over an area of 150km² were cage-trapped and killed from 1998 to 2005.

The RBCT results suggested that the benefits of culling, i.e. reductions in incidence of bTB in cattle in the culled area, may not be seen for three to four years after culling begins, but could continue for at least six years after culling stops, and found that an average 16% reduction in bTB incidence in the local area could be expected. However, the report concluded that badger culling could make no meaningful contribution to bTB control in Britain and recommended that control efforts focus on other measures.

The RBCT report also found that, whilst culling produced a decreased Badger population locally, it disrupted their territorial system, causing any surviving badgers to range more widely, which itself led to a substantial increase in the incidence of the disease and its wider dispersal. However, the Government's Chief Scientific Advisor at the time contended that badger culling could indeed make a useful contribution to controlling bTB.

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) announced on 14th December 2011 that culling would be allowed to be carried out by groups of farmers and landowners, as part of a science-led and carefully managed policy of badger control.

As a first step, there would be a pilot of the policy in two areas to confirm assumptions about the effectiveness in terms of badger removal, humaneness and safety of culling. Culling operations would be paid for by the industry, delivered by trained operators and closely monitored by the Government.

Natural England issued culling licences (under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992) for West Gloucestershire (17th September 2012) and West Somerset (4th October 2012) to reduce badger populations for the purpose of preventing the spread of bTB. Natural England issued authorisation letters to the two pilot areas on 27th February 2013, confirming the final conditions have been met for culling to go ahead there later this year.

Each licence has a four-year term, authorising six-week control operations to be carried out annually between 1st June and 31st January. Licensees are authorised to reduce badger populations in the two pilot areas by at least 70% and a maximum numbers of badgers have been specified to prevent the risk of local extinction.

An area in Dorset is being prepared as a contingency in the event that unforeseen circumstances prevent one of the current areas going ahead.

There is no reliable, practical way of distinguishing between infected and uninfected badgers. Operators are required to follow best practice guidelines, undertake training and competence testing, and liaise closely with local police, including on dates, times and areas where badger control will take place. Controlled shooting is not permitted close to villages or towns and restricted near public rights of way.

Independent monitoring will be undertaken to assess the humaneness of controlled shooting through field observations and post-mortems. An independent panel has been appointed to report to ministers. If they decide to proceed after the pilots, at least ten licences will be granted to start each year.

Measures to tackle cattle to cattle transmission alone are not enough to prevent the spread of bTB in the worst affected areas. No country with a wildlife reservoir of the disease has successfully eradicated bTB in cattle without addressing its presence in the wildlife population.

Vaccination is a recognised means of preventing the spread of bTB, but cattle that had been vaccinated would fail legally mandatory tuberculin tests, which is a requirement under European Union Directive. An injectable badger vaccine is available, but is only effective on uninfected animals and can only be delivered by trained vaccinators with a Natural England licence.

In Wales, badger vaccination is carried out in preference to culling. A field trial into the vaccination of badgers is under way in the Republic of Ireland, whilst neither culling nor vaccination is carried out in Northern Ireland, although a review into bTB has been undertaken. Scotland was declared officially tuberculosis-free under EU rules in 2009, so there are no proposals to cull badgers there.

Badger is not an endangered species, but is among the most legally-protected wild animals in the UK, being covered by the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats.

As of 14th June 2013, 250,780 people had signed an e-petition calling on the government to stop the Badger cull.

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