HUMANE SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL
UNITED KINGDOM

October 2013

Dear Councillor,

Mechanisms for Controlling Bovine Tuberculosis

I understand that Cheshire West & Chester council is to hold a debate and vote tomorrow (Thursday 17th October), on whether or not badger culling will be allowed to take place on council land. The motion, as I understand it, has been tabled by Councillor Nicole Meardon.

As a veterinarian with extensive experience in in dealing with the control of disease among farmed animals who is now working for an animal protection charity, I am very supportive of Councillor Meardon's motion. I would like to thank her for bringing this important issue to the attention of Cheshire West & Chester council, and urge you to support the motion.

There is no question that bovine tuberculosis is a serious problem in parts of the west of England, and results in hardship for farmers through direct costs and disruption of their businesses, as well as imposing a significant burden on the taxpayer. Government officials are keen to say that 'doing nothing is not an option', and I couldn't agree more.

However, doing the wrong thing will only make matters worse, and the indiscriminate culling of badgers is the wrong thing to do.

The role of badgers in the spread of tuberculosis has been the subject of much debate for many years, and there have been various efforts made since the 1970s to reduce badger populations through the use of culling; these have resulted in widespread animal suffering and disruption of wildlife populations, and have clearly not resulted in the control of bovine TB.

The Randomised Badger Culling Trial, set up following the Krebs Review of 1997[i], was designed to test once and for all whether culling badgers in large numbers, and by doing so significantly reducing their populations over large areas of our countryside, could play a significant role in the control of bovine TB in cattle. It remains the only source of credible scientific field-based information. After almost 10 years during which around 11,000 badgers were killed at a cost to the taxpayer of around £50 million, the independent group of scientists who were charged with overseeing the trial and collating the results concluded that *"badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB in Britain"*[ii]. The government of the day rejected any further licensed badger culling on the basis of this conclusion.

The current government published its Policy on Bovine TB and Badger Control in England[iii] in December 2011, and the 'pilot badger culls' which are ongoing in Gloucestershire and Somerset form part of this policy. These 'pilots' have proved to be an unmitigated disaster, with government

radically reducing population estimates after the trials had begun, shooters still failing to kill the target proportions of badgers, and anecdotal reports of severe animal suffering. A YouGov poll we commissioned earlier this week showed that 51% of the public regard the pilots as a failure, with only 15% regarding them as a success. In addition, 58% of respondents oppose any future use of gassing, which is something the government has indicated it is considering.

Killing badgers will not solve the problem of TB in cattle; indeed, it risks making things considerably worse by disrupting badger populations and causing survivors to spread over wide areas, potentially spreading infection to more badgers and possibly to cattle. This 'perturbation effect' was recognised during the Randomised badger Culling Trial and is very likely to result in increased problems for farmers around the pilot cull areas in Gloucestershire and Somerset over the coming months. As we have seen, badger culling also causes widespread public anger, bringing with it significant divisions within communities and high associated policing costs.

Proponents of culling will tell you there is no alternative way of controlling bovine TB in the badger population. They are wrong. An injectable vaccine exists, and although its use presents practical challenges, it is being successfully deployed in Wales and in some parts of England. Vaccinating even a modest proportion of the badgers in a population has been shown to significantly reduce the prevalence of infection within that population, and reduce the risk of infection even among unvaccinated cubs[iv]. Vaccination also eliminates the problem of perturbation because badger populations are not disrupted. Experts agree that vaccination offers a far more progressive approach to controlling bovine TB among badger populations than does culling[v].

What's more, vaccination programmes can bring government, farmers and civil society together in a joint effort to help control this disease, rather than causing societal divisions. As such the high policing costs and damaging divisions within communities are avoided.

With these points in mind, I would once again urge you to take an important step by supporting the motion to ban badger culling and promote badger vaccination on council land, which in turn will help send a strong message to central government that its national policy should follow a similar path. Only this way can we avoid the kinds of damaging conflict we have seen in Gloucestershire and Somerset in recent weeks, and instead see stakeholders from all sections of our communities coming together to help solve a difficult problem in a humane, science-led, constructive, and most of all collaborative way.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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[i] http://www.bovinetb.info/docs/krebs.pdf

[ii] http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/diseases/atoz/tb/isg/report/final_report.pdf

[iii] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69463/pb13691-bovinetb-policy-statement.pdf

[iv] Carter SP, Chambers MA, Rushton SP, Shirley MDF, Schuchert P, et al. (2012) BCG Vaccination Reduces Risk of Tuberculosis Infection in Vaccinated Badgers and Unvaccinated Badger Cubs. PLoS ONE 7(12): e49833. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0049833

[v] Rosie Woodroffe (2013) Comparing the epidemiological effects of badger vaccination and culling. https://www.zsl.org/science/events/vaccination-in-the-control-of-bovine-tb,773,EV.html