



Gassing badgers: the facts

Gassing badgers presents serious welfare concerns, not only for the targeted badgers, but for a wide range of other wildlife, including protected species.

In June 2013, DEFRA stated, in reply to a Freedom of Information request from the Badger Trust, that *“There are currently no research and development projects investigating alternative culling methods, and as such no trials of alternative culling methods are being run.”* [1]

On 10 October 2013, DEFRA Secretary of State, Owen Paterson said: *“Yes, gassing is under consideration, but we will not use it unless it is proven to be safe, humane and effective.”* [2]

In April 2014, DEFRA published The Strategy for Achieving Officially Bovine Tuberculosis-Free Status for England. This document confirmed that gassing *“has been considered”*, adding: *“This includes investigations into the use of gases such as carbon monoxide or anoxic gas-filled foam as a sett-based means of humane culling.”* [3]

Trials underway

In a Freedom of Information request, dated 6 June 2014, DEFRA confirmed that in October and November 2013 it had *“carried out initial trials of nitrogen-filled foam [in an artificial structure] to understand dispersal of the material.”* [4]

On 19 June 2014, in response to a question from Roger Godsiff MP, Farming Minister George Eustice confirmed that *“planned further research involves preliminary tests to investigate the potential use of carbon monoxide in a sett environment. These preliminary tests will not involve the use of either live badgers or active setts. Whether or not we proceed with further research involving live badgers or active setts will depend upon the outcome of these preliminary tests.”* [5]

Although no live animals or active setts have yet been used this reveals a worrying escalation of DEFRA's interest in gassing as a method of killing badgers.

Gassing “inhumane”

The only data that exists on the response of badgers to gas exposure involved hydrogen cyanide, the gas used by MAFF to kill badgers from 1975. Its use was stopped in 1982 after a review found that badgers exposed to the gas did not die rapidly and experienced significant suffering.

In 2005 DEFRA published a review of lethal methods for badger control [6] which included examination of the use of various gasses for sett-based culling.

The trials identified big problems with achieving lethal concentrations of gases throughout complex badger setts.

The review stated: *“The use of fumigants could be suitable for smaller burrow systems, but cannot be reliably expected to kill all the animals in a complex system. The use of fumigants against other species (e.g. rabbits and moles) suggests that typically 20% of resident animals survive fumigation of their burrows.”*

Welfare concerns

- Sett gassing has been shown not to be humane because of difficulties achieving lethal concentrations of gas rapidly throughout complex badger setts
- Death by gassing can cause considerable animal suffering. Previous gassing studies show that cats, dogs, guinea pigs and monkeys display a range of responses to gas exposure, from tremors and vomiting to severe lung pain, heart attack, suffocation, coma and death.
- Sub lethal exposure to carbon monoxide, the gas DEFRA has indicated it will consider in future trials, caused vomiting, urination and defecation in dogs, and limb paralysis, blindness and deafness in monkeys.
- The difficulties in delivering gas to complex badger setts mean that many animals will inevitably experience sub lethal exposure, so the potential for animal suffering is huge.
- Sett gassing is indiscriminate and could impact other animals in or near targeted badger setts, which could potentially include some endangered species
- Gassing tends to be less effective on dependent young which could leave many badgers orphaned, resulting in significant additional welfare concerns
- Sett-based gassing could find the government in contravention of Article 8 of the Bern Convention ^[7] which prohibits ‘the use of all indiscriminate means of capture and killing and the use of all means capable of causing local disappearance of, or serious disturbance to, populations of a species [in Appendix III, which includes badgers], and in particular, the means specified in Appendix IV [which includes ‘gassing or smoking out’]’.

Illegal gassing

Concerns have been raised about farmers taking the law into their own hands and illegally gassing badgers. In October 2013 a father and son in Somerset pleaded guilty to blocking seventeen entrances to a badger sett on their farm and piping exhaust fumes into the soil to gas badgers to death. They were each fined £1,370 at Yeovil Magistrates Court. ^[8]

EDM 61 – Badger Gassing

Tabled on 10 June 2014, EDM 61 ^[9] states:

That this House is concerned by recent reports that the Government has been authorising secret trials gassing badger setts, even though its own earlier research has indicated that such methods regularly failed to work; notes that such practices were banned in England nearly three decades ago when they were found to be cruel, harmful and useless; and calls on the Government to cease all field trials of such methods immediately.

References:

1. DEFRA, EIR 5525, 24 June 2013
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/210560/EIR_5525.pdf
2. Owen Paterson, 10 Oct 2013, column 284
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm131010/debtext/131010-0001.htm#13101061000027>

3. The Strategy for Achieving Officially Bovine Tuberculosis-Free Status for England. DEFRA. April 2014 (p65)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-strategy-for-achieving-officially-bovine-tuberculosis-free-status-for-england>
4. DEFRA, RFI6497, 6 June 2014
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/318210/RFI6487_revised_response_badgers.pdf
5. George Eustice, 19 Jun 2014 , column 689W
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140619/text/140619w0001.htm#1406196800098>
6. Review of effectiveness, environmental impact, humaneness and feasibility of lethal methods for badger control. A report to European Wildlife Division, Defra 20 October 2005. <http://www.bovinetb.info/docs/Review-of-effectiveness-environmental-impact-humaneness-and-feasibility-of-lethal-methods-for-badger-control.pdf>
7. Bern Convention <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/104.htm>
8. Badger Trust <http://badger.org.uk/news/posts/2013/farmers-fined-for-gassing-badger-setts.aspx>
9. EDM 61 <http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2014-15/61>