

**STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY ON THE WAY
FORWARD ON TUBERCULOSIS (TB)**

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DEVELOPMENT**

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- With your permission Mr Speaker I wish to make a Statement regarding my decision on the way forward in the North on TB.
- We have identified with our key stakeholders a new strategic approach for how we deal with TB. This is an agreed joint industry/Government approach on TB.
- The aim is, through industry and Government partnership, to move towards the eradication of TB in the most cost-effective way and in a realistic timeframe.
- The timing and implementation of the strategy as we move forward depends on how and when it is resourced.

Current TB disease situation

- I would first like to set the scene by outlining the current TB disease situation in the North.
- We have made considerable progress with TB in recent years. Since peak levels for the disease in 2002, the herd incidence has been reduced here by nearly 50%.
- This is in sharp contrast to the experience in Britain where the incidence of TB has been increasing. In the North, overall the trend in disease levels has been downwards over the past 5 years or so.
- Bovine TB is a very complex disease and it continues to be one of the most challenging and costly animal health problems we are facing. The total cost to government of controlling this disease was over £21m in the 2007/08 financial year, plus costs to the sector.

TB programme – key strengths and benefits

- My assessment is that the TB programme we are already implementing, which is based mainly on cattle controls, has been successful in reducing TB in cattle here. Importantly, it has supported trade in live cattle and products.
- Our programme is based on a well-established system of annual TB herd testing, which gives us a clear picture of the disease situation here. Every herd in the North is tested at least once every year for TB.
- We believe that the enhanced TB measures that were introduced in 2004, particularly the tighter restrictions on overdue TB tests and changes to the valuation system, have contributed to the reduction in disease here.
- I also know that our farmers have played a crucial role in reducing the disease in cattle and preventing its spread by co-operating with the tougher controls.

PSA target for further reduction in TB

- The present position is that we have made encouraging progress so far with TB.
- Whilst over recent months we have seen a levelling off in the downward trend in TB, and there has even been a slight increase, it is too early to say that this will be a sustained change in the direction of the trend.
- We have a key goal in the Programme for Government to achieve a 27% reduction in the herd incidence of TB by 2011.
- But it is not possible to achieve eradication within the timeframe of the current Programme for Government.
- And it is clear that to eradicate this disease it will take longer than this, plus we will need to do more than we are currently doing.

The need for a way forward

- I said at the Balmoral Show that I would make a decision by the end of this year on the way forward on TB, including the contentious issue of badgers.
- Since then, two major pieces of work have been carried out which have helped to inform my decision.
- Firstly, as recommended by the Badger Stakeholder Group, my Department has completed an assessment of the available evidence in relation to the role of badgers in bovine TB in cattle to inform an appropriate course of action in the North, including whether it is appropriate to run a badger culling trial.
- Secondly since last summer, my officials have worked in partnership with the leaders of the key industry and veterinary organisations – the Ulster Farmers' Union, NIAPA, National Beef Association NI and the Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland (AVSPNI) - in the TB Core Stakeholder Working Group to assess all aspects of TB policy and to identify more clearly what could be done to move further towards the eradication of TB in cattle in the North.
- This has been a new and unique partnership approach to this very complex and difficult disease problem.
- The key wildlife interests have been consulted as part of this process.
- At the end of November, I received the conclusions of the work of the TB Core Stakeholder Working Group and the Group's proposals for the way forward on TB, plus the views of wildlife interests.

Findings of the assessment on badgers

- I first want to say something about the findings of my Department's assessment of the evidence relating to badgers.
- The key question we are seeking to address in respect of badgers and TB in cattle is whether a badger intervention strategy would help to achieve a cost-effective reduction in TB incidence in cattle in the North.
- Having assessed all the available information from work in Britain and in the South, my veterinary advice is that it is not possible to extrapolate the information we need from the work that has been done in Britain and in the South. There are still key gaps in our scientific knowledge that need to be filled to inform what we do to deal cost-effectively with the reservoir of infection in badgers, and to enable us to deal with TB comprehensively and conclusively.
- In order to produce the necessary information, my veterinary advice is that we should undertake a study of the prevalence and distribution of TB in badgers and a badger removal trial. These studies will provide baseline information on disease and the costs of badger intervention, and inform where any cull or other intervention may be most effectively targeted.

Findings of the work in partnership with stakeholders

- I now want to say something about the findings of the work we have done in partnership with our key stakeholders through the TB Core Stakeholder Working Group.
- The Group looked at the experience of other countries that have eradicated TB or that are on their way to eradicating the disease, and the key lessons to be learned from their experience.
- The Group also considered a spectrum of possible options for dealing with TB here, including implementing an intensive eradication programme.

- The consensus of the Group is that the eradication of TB in the North is **not** a realistic prospect **in the short-term**.
- This is because it would not be realistic for farmers here to make the huge changes to farming practices that an intensive eradication programme would require, if we were to introduce one immediately. It is also because a cost-effective means of preventing re-infection from the badger population is not yet known.
- The Group has developed and proposed **a phased strategy towards the eradication of TB**.
- This strategy is designed as a **holistic** approach that addresses three key strands together, which are – real partnership between government and industry, controlling the spread of TB between cattle, and addressing the wildlife factor.

My decision on the way forward

- Moving now to my decision about the way forward on TB and the issue of badgers.
- In coming to my decision about the way forward I have considered all the evidence, and the views of our industry and of wildlife conservation stakeholders.
- I am clear that our ultimate aspiration should be the eradication of TB. I know that is what all stakeholders want to achieve.
- I recognise the benefits that moving towards the eradication of TB would deliver in terms of maintaining our export trade, avoiding production losses, and ultimately reducing disease and the associated costs.

- However, the key message for us is that to eradicate TB will take a long time and it will be a painful and expensive process for both Government and industry. It will require strong, committed Government and industry partnership working to see it through to ultimate success.
- It is also clear to me that eradication of TB may only be achievable following scientific advances and considerable additional expense and disruption to current industry practices.
- On badgers, I recognise that badger vaccination may be the most feasible solution in the long-term, but it could be some time before an effective badger vaccine becomes available.
- The issue is whether the best way forward is to maintain our existing approach on TB until an effective badger vaccine becomes available, or to take steps in the interim to explore whether culling of badgers could be a cost-effective way of bringing about a reduction in TB in cattle here in the medium-term.
- I believe that at this time we need a realistic and pragmatic strategy that will move towards the eradication of TB in the most cost-effective way. We need to create the conditions that enable an intensive programme to be implemented in future, to finally drive this disease out of our cattle population.
- On badgers, I believe that we should act to fill the key gaps in our scientific knowledge to inform what we do to deal cost-effectively with the reservoir of infection in badgers. It is also important that we position ourselves so that we are ready to act whenever an effective solution does become available.
- I therefore welcome the phased and holistic strategy that has been developed in partnership with our key stakeholders.
- I would like to pursue this new strategic approach to moving forward on TB.

- As I said at the beginning of my Statement, the aim is, through industry and Government partnership, to move towards the eradication of TB in the most cost-effective way and in a realistic timeframe.
- The key point I want to bring out is that to move towards the eradication of TB it is absolutely essential that there is a robust partnership between Government and industry, a combination of DARD and industry actions and strong commitment and leadership from both industry and Government.
- This will be a holistic approach to TB based on addressing the 3 key strands that the Core Stakeholder Working Group has identified.
- It will not be a quick fix. I recognise that this strategic approach will not deliver the eradication of TB in the near future, but will lay the foundations that are necessary for the eventual eradication of this disease.
- It will be a long-term strategy for the North that we will deliver through a series of phases. We will set goals for each phase that are shared by Government and industry. We will review what we have achieved after each phase and refresh our strategy for the next phase.
- I have agreed to accept the recommendation of the Core Stakeholder Working Group that the shared industry/Government goals for the first phase of the strategy (for the 5 years 2009/10 – 2013/14) are:
 - ❖ To maintain Trade - maintaining compliance with EU requirements as a minimum, and
 - ❖ To produce more effective and efficient ways of reducing transmission of TB cattle to cattle and wildlife to cattle
- Whilst the overall aim of the strategy is to reduce the levels of disease and the costs of disease and ultimately eradicate TB, the disease levels we detect

may increase rather than decrease by the end of the first phase.

This is because we will be aiming to improve detection and removal of disease, as well as to develop better tools. And we must bear in mind that measures taken to improve the detection of disease will by their very nature initially raise the disease incidence because more infected animals will be detected.

- The first 5 year phase will be about laying the foundations for future phases of the strategy. By the end of the first phase we will be better placed to know whether we are ready to go for eradication in the next phase, or if we will maintain a holding position, or steady progress.
- In order to push towards eradication, future phases will require more stringent controls, considerable changes to existing farming practices, and addressing the wildlife factor.

Actions to deliver the Goals

- The priority areas for the first phase of the strategy will be:
- To build a **real partnership between government and industry**. This will underpin everything else we do in this strategy
- We want to enhance the involvement of stakeholders at both leadership and local farmer levels.
- We intend to work with local farmers so they understand better the causes of TB on their farm and what they can do to address the risks and protect themselves from infection.
- We will develop our partnership with private veterinary practitioners to see what more could be done to develop and provide effective solutions.

- Regarding the **control of the spread of TB between cattle**,
- Our priorities will be to keep our export trade open and to produce more effective and efficient ways of reducing transmission of TB from cattle to cattle.
- Regarding **addressing the wildlife factor**,
- Our priority will be to pursue the necessary information gathering actions and research to fill the priority knowledge gaps and build the evidence we need to make informed policy decisions about wildlife intervention in the North, and to produce more cost effective and efficient ways of reducing transmission of TB between wildlife and cattle.
- Subject to the agreement of the DOE Minister where necessary, and subject to bids for the significant additional funding that will be needed, my Department will undertake the studies and trials that I believe are necessary to guide decisions.
- We will use the evidence these actions produce, to guide what we do to reduce the transmission of TB from wildlife to cattle and to help shape the next phase of our strategy.

Early actions

- Whilst more work now needs to be done to develop the detail of actions to deliver the shared industry/Government goals for the first phase, I wish to announce a number of early actions my Department will take in the first phase of the strategy.
- We will continue to maximise the effectiveness of delivery of the TB programme within the level of resource available.

- Starting in the New Year, we will undertake a TB case control study in a high incidence area of the North. The aim of the case control study will be to identify and evaluate selected cattle-related and badger-related risk factors on both TB infected and clean farms. We intend to focus the study in County Down, which contains some of the worst TB affected areas, and to look at approximately 350 diseased and clean herds.
- We want to assess what differences there are between herds that are infected and herds that remain free of disease in the same TB high incidence area. We propose to use the findings to help identify key risk factors and develop best practice and biosecurity advice that can be rolled out to herdkeepers across the North.
- Over this winter, my Department will undertake background surveillance to ascertain the current bovine TB prevalence in wild deer so as better to inform policy towards TB in cattle that may be associated with such deer.
- We will progress our plans for a badger prevalence study to start next year, subject to the necessary bid for additional expenditure.
- We will develop plans for a badger removal trial, subject to the agreement of the DOE Minister and the necessary bid for additional expenditure.
- We will continue to explore how best we can contribute to the development of a vaccine for badgers.

Resourcing the strategy

- Turning to the resources needed to support the strategy. The timing and implementation of the strategy as we move forward will depend on how and when it is resourced.
- We will seek to deliver this strategy as cost effectively as possible.

- Where additional expenditure is needed, this will have to be supported by a robust business case and be subject to successful bids for the necessary resources.
- I have already indicated the need for additional resource through this year's strategic stocktake for the remaining two years of this Comprehensive Spending Review period, though clearly the outcome is not yet known. I intend to bid for the additional resource, subject to an economic appraisal, through in-year monitoring and in the 2009 budget exercise.
- We will continue to look outwards to tap into the experiences of others and the results of research undertaken elsewhere.
- We will make the most of opportunities to share research being done in Britain and the South and elsewhere to avoid unnecessary and expensive duplication. We will support specific research in the North as appropriate.

Comprehensive approach to TB and Brucellosis

- This TB strategy is part of a comprehensive approach I am taking to deal decisively with both bovine TB and Brucellosis in the North.
- I have said that our aim for TB is to position ourselves so that in 5 years time we can make informed decisions about the next phase in our strategy, to move us closer towards the ultimate aim of TB eradication.
- Regarding Brucellosis, this is a very different disease and I believe that it should be possible to eradicate Brucellosis in the North in the next 5 years.
- My aim is to eradicate Brucellosis as soon as possible and to wipe out the costs of this disease. I am prepared to step up the existing Brucellosis control measures if necessary in order to achieve that. I am committed to pursuing the Brucellosis initiative we started earlier this year, which has been very helpful.

Conclusion

- Finally, we will continue to work in partnership with our key stakeholders to develop this strategy for TB.

- The next steps will be to work with the TB Core Stakeholder Working Group and in consultation with wildlife stakeholders to develop:
 - ❖ specific detailed proposals for action to deliver the shared goals in the first phase
 - ❖ a robust business case for any additional expenditure needed, and
 - ❖ to consult formally to determine public opinion in response to our proposals.

- May I conclude by thanking all our stakeholders for their on-going constructive engagement with us in relation to TB. I know that success will be achieved through a shared understanding of the issues and shared commitment to the goals I have outlined.

- Thank you Mr Speaker.