Badgers and Vaccination

Everything you wanted to know about badger vaccination but were afraid to ask.

Many Wildlife Trusts depend on grazing livestock for the management of threatened habitats and therefore recognise the need for eradicating this terrible disease. Wildlife Trusts are unanimous in advocating badger vaccination as the most sustainable method presently available, an approach supported by current Welsh Government policy.

Why is vaccination better than culling?

Vaccination is the only way of targeting the disease. Culling only targets the host, reducing badger numbers temporarily. As badger populations recover, they have the same (or even greater) levels of disease in their populations. Vaccination is the only approach that actually reduces the prevalence of bTB.

How do we know the vaccine is safe?

The vaccine given to badgers is the Bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG), the same kind used in humans.

Is the vaccine effective?

Results from the largest field trial to date (published in 2010) showed a 73.8% reduction in positive blood tests in badgers. The knock-on impact on disease levels in cattle, however, is not yet proven. Unfortunately, funding was cut for a large Badger Vaccine Deployment Project (reducing it from six projects to one).

Will vaccinating a badger cure it of bTB?

No—vaccination doesn't cure bTB, in the same way that a measles vaccination doesn't cure someone with measles.
Will cubs catch bTB before they leave the sett for the first time?

A clinical field trial of badger vaccination published last year by the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency and the Food and Environment Research Agency, showed that unvaccinated cubs can be indirectly protected from bTB when some of the adult badgers in their family group have been vaccinated.

Is badger vaccination more expensive than culling?

No. The latest Welsh Government figures show that it is no more expensive to trap and vaccinate badgers than it is to trap and cull. Labour involved in trapping the animals is the single largest cost in either approach. An oral delivery mechanism will probably be available within the next ten years that will remove the need to trap badgers and will therefore dramatically reduce costs.

What can go wrong?

Unlike culling, vaccination can’t make bTB worse. It does not cause perturbation (the spread of the disease as new badgers move into territories vacated by culled badgers) as it leaves their social structure intact.

Surely it’s better to vaccinate the cattle?

This remains an aspiration, but at present is not possible under European law, and so control in cattle remains dependent upon testing and the removal of infected livestock.

Clearly there is still research required to determine the effects of badger vaccination on the levels of bTB in cattle, and on cheaper, quicker ways to deliver the vaccine to badgers. Whatever happens, bTB will remain a key issue for rural communities for some years to come, and The Wildlife Trusts remain committed to pursuing vaccination as the best way forward for cattle, for people- and for badgers.

Badger vaccination is working here in Wales

The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales (WTSWW) has now completed two years of a five year vaccination programme at its Castle Woods nature reserve near Llandeilo. This vaccination project has been supported by the Welsh Government’s Badger Vaccination Grant.

In 2014, trapping in June resulted in the vaccination of 34 individuals, including 29 cubs. In 2015, trapping in July resulted in the vaccination of 27 individuals, including 23 cubs. WTSWW has estimated that the cost of this work is about £19 per head of cattle protected, per year, based on the area of land used by the vaccinated badgers and basing the cattle stocking density across that area on the average for England and Wales.