

Policy update



It's never black and white

The postponement of the Government's planned badger cull illustrates the complexity of policymaking

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Owen Paterson, recently announced that plans for a badger cull pilot have been postponed. It follows the Government's U-turn on proposals to sell off the Public Forest Estate earlier in the year. Public power packs a punch, at least where the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is concerned.

But policy is built not only on public need and want, but economic implications – and, we hope, scientific evidence. The publicly unpopular badger cull, designed to restrict the spread of bovine TB, illustrates how these factors combine and the difficulties faced by policymakers in balancing vested interests.

Bovine TB has been a major concern for the farming community for decades, with whole herds being lost to the disease and the cost of testing and movement restrictions having a serious impact on the livelihoods of farmers. Meanwhile, the Badger Trust organised an e-petition to halt the cull, gathering more than 150,000 signatures and causing a parliamentary debate in which the Government was defeated.

Positive and negative effects

The 10-year, £50m Randomised Badger Culling Trial, led by Lord Krebs, found that culling had both positive and negative effects on incidence of bovine TB. It found risk of a “perturbation effect”, where disturbed badgers move

out of the cull area to form new groups, carrying TB with them. Krebs concluded that culling would make a “modest difference” in TB incidence, but it was not practical or economically feasible to carry out culling on the scale necessary. A review of the Krebs Trial by the then chief scientific adviser Sir David King found, at a scale of 300km², culling “would have a significant effect on reducing TB in cattle”.

Later, the Commons' Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee reviewed all evidence, stating: “Conclusions of the two reports differ mainly because Sir David King's group of experts did not include the practicalities or costs of culling in its considerations.”

Economics and practicalities

Bovine TB has cost the UK taxpayer £500m in the last 10 years and is estimated to cost £1bn over the next decade if no further action is taken. It is estimated that each pilot cull will cost £100,000 a year, but due to strong public feeling, policing costs (to keep the cull safe amid protests) are estimated at £500,000 per cull over the four-year period.

Ultimately, the practicalities of the pilot culls led to their postponement. The National Farmers Union called on Paterson to delay plans after a survey revealed more badgers than expected in the cull zones. Farmers were not confident they could remove the required minimum of 70 percent of the badgers in the two pilot areas this autumn, and asked for more time to prepare.

It's clear that more needs to be done. The Government's current method of controlling the disease – surveillance, testing and slaughter – is not working effectively. More research is needed on both vaccinations and how effective a cull would be – and practical, fiscal and ethical concerns must be addressed before deciding on whether culling is an effective policy.

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