



NSA Policy Position

NSA policy position on bTB (*Mycobacterium bovis*) in sheep

Background

- *Mycobacterium bovis* is a bacteria commonly found in animals, and the cause of tuberculosis in cattle, which can pass into humans.
- More than 30,000 cows are culled as positive reactors for bTB annually in England and Wales.
- Sheep can be infected with bTB through contact with infected cattle, animals and wildlife.
- Sheep are not a primary reservoir for the disease but are considered spill over hosts, with a limited number of reports of sheep infected with *m bovis*.
- It is possible for sheep to transmit the disease to other animals and humans, but by and large sheep are considered dead end hosts.
- *M bovis* infection in sheep is typically detected by the recognition of suspicious lesions at slaughter, or at a diagnostic post-mortem examination where the lesions have often been incidental findings.

Signs of TB in animals are:

- Coughing or breathing problems
- Loss of condition
- Loss of appetite
- Debilitating disease
- Reduced milk yield (for dairy animals)
- Seeing no improvement from a respiratory infection after antibiotic treatment

NSA Believes

- In the absence of a national surveillance programme on farm, routine slaughterhouse inspection is merited.
- Participation in voluntary national disease surveillance programmes such as carcass submission to APHA post-mortem centres and the Thin Ewe Project can help monitor bTB in sheep, as well as iceberg and exotic diseases.
- Post-mortems on ewes that die on farm are recommended for a host of reasons, but monitoring bTB is one of them.
- While bTB is a notifiable disease, any follow-on investigation in sheep must consider the evidence indicating how sheep show considerable resistance to bTB, and therefore further exploration should be proportionate and considerate of sheep production systems as well as seasonality.



Reasoning

- Many sheep flocks are extensive, spreading over a very large area making gathering for TB testing a colossal task with the average number of sheep in a flock considerably more than the average number of cattle in a herd.
- Repeatedly turning sheep over to test them on the inner thigh is a very stressful procedure for the animals compared with cattle testing. The risk of handling sheep in this way would be high from tugging through to shearing, as losses may be expected from abortion, clostridial disease, pasteurellosis or mismothering.
- The welfare implications of gathering large numbers of sheep for TB testing are great especially at certain times of year such as close to lambing or hot weather and close contact increases risk of diseases such as foot rot, CODD and orf and put them at significant risk of developing Pasteurella pneumonia.

Future

- Compensation for culling infected sheep should be regularly reviewed – it is currently £80 for animals under one year, and £130 for breeding females over one year. Rams are £350.
- NSA will advocate for compensation schemes and government-funded skin testing and tracings to continue.
- Independent, peer-reviewed scientific trials have shown Badger Control Policy (which includes culling) reduced cattle TB incidence 56%. While unpopular with the wider public, this suggests culling licenses may have a place in disease management.