

CAROLYN THOMAS

MS FOR NORTH WALES / AS DROS GOGLEDD CYMRU

Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs

By Email

26th July 2024

Dear Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs,

Re: Unfair criticism of bTB record in Wales

It is my view that Wales gets unfair criticism for its record on bovine tuberculosis (bTB) in cattle, because figures and graphs published quarterly by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) grossly under-report the infection rates in English cattle compared to Welsh cattle. This means that the comparison is artificially skewed in England's favour. Wales correctly identifies more cases of infection because it uses a more sensitive test and tests more frequently, not because Wales has more infection.

The figures published by DEFRA directly influences and misleads public and industry opinion by presenting uncontextualised information as official statistics. As it stands, many people believe DEFRA's published figures are misleading to the public, to elected representatives, and importantly to our farmers.

As you will be aware, Wales uses both Single Intradermal Comparative Cervical Tuberculin Test (SICCT) testing and Interferon Gamma (Gamma) testing as standard on all cattle. Gamma is very much more sensitive than SICCT, therefore Wales identifies and removes more bTB from the national herd per 100 head of cattle on average than if it only used SICCT. SICCT is typically quoted as being approx. 80% reliable (sensitivity between 50% and 85% depending on whether read at severe).

Interferon Gamma is much more reliable than SICCT showing sensitivity in excess of 90%.

England only uses SICCT testing as standard in English cattle, finding and removing far fewer infected animals per 100 head of cattle on average than Wales. DEFRA have not provided an answer to why SICCT testing has been selected, only advising that the reasons are commercially sensitive.

DEFRA actively discourage English cattle owners from learning the true rates of infection in their herds. Farmers may use Gamma testing in addition at their own expense but if they find an animal with bTB as a result, DEFRA will not pay them full, or sometimes any, compensation for the lost animal. This is a disincentive to English livestock owners to test for and remove infected cattle. Meanwhile, Welsh cattle owners automatically get paid compensation for cattle testing positive following Gamma testing.

Testing frequency in Wales is higher than in England additionally skewing the published data e.g English cattle in the Low Risk Areas are only tested once every four years, whereas no cattle in Wales are tested less often than annually.

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As Cabinet Secretary, would you please write to the Secretary of State for DEFRA and request that in future, publications of Welsh and English data on bTB in cattle should make clear that Wales:

- 1) uses the much more reliable test than that which is mandated in England, and
- 2) tests even low risk more frequently

As a result, the figures are simply not comparable.

At a conservative estimate using the test sensitivity difference alone, English figures appear to miss around 1 in 5 more cases than they would if England also used Gamma as its standard test as Wales does.

I would appreciate if you could further write to the Director General of the Office for Statistical Regulation (Ed Humpherson) to raise these concerns, as well as requesting that the OSR look into the way that the official statistics are used by DEFRA, and the way in which they misleading the public about the situation in Wales vs England.

Yours Sincerely,



Carolyn Thomas

Member of the Senedd for North Wales

De la Rúa-Domenech R, Goodchild A.T, Vordermeier H.M, Hewinson R.G, Christiansen K.H, Clifton-Hadley R.S. (2006). Ante mortem diagnosis of tuberculosis in cattle: A review of the tuberculin tests, γ -interferon assay and other ancillary diagnostic techniques. Research in Veterinary Science 81 (2006) 190–210

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