



Letters & Notices

BOVINE TB

Radical change in bovine TB testing needed

THE recent independent review on bovine TB (bTB) wrongly implies a badger culling effect can be deduced before the introduction of effective interferon- γ (IFN- γ) testing.¹ While the omission of reporting on key bTB interventions in badger control areas within the High Risk Area (HRA) and Edge Area in a recent government publication² has now been documented,³ it is worth demonstrating how, after 2013, the number of officially TB-free status withdrawn (OTF-W) incidents resulting from single intradermal comparative cervical tuberculin (SICCT) testing was supplemented by increased parallel IFN- γ testing, which in turn disclosed more reactors,⁴ reducing breakdown duration and residual infection.⁵

Further details on the use of IFN- γ testing (Fig 1) and IFN- γ reactors for the cull areas 1 to 53⁶ illustrate IFN- γ use during and either side of the 2013–2020 badger cull study window, where study outcomes may appear conflicted without close scrutiny.^{2,7} Supplementary IFN- γ testing is a major potential driver of a fall in herd incidence in the first three years of interventions and beyond. Data also demonstrate how easing off of the use of IFN- γ tests to supplement statutory SICCT testing in the Edge Area in 2022 in particular (linked to post-Brexit funding limitations) is likely to have significantly hindered disease control. This means the 2014 government targets for bTB eradication by 2025 for the whole of the Low Risk Area and the lowest prevalence counties in the Edge Area have been officially missed.⁸

In a freedom of information disclosure in late April 2025⁹ in response to a question as to whether bTB freedom is unachievable under present conditions of testing and cattle controls, the APHA responded: 'APHA has not yet produced models suitable for predicting whether TB

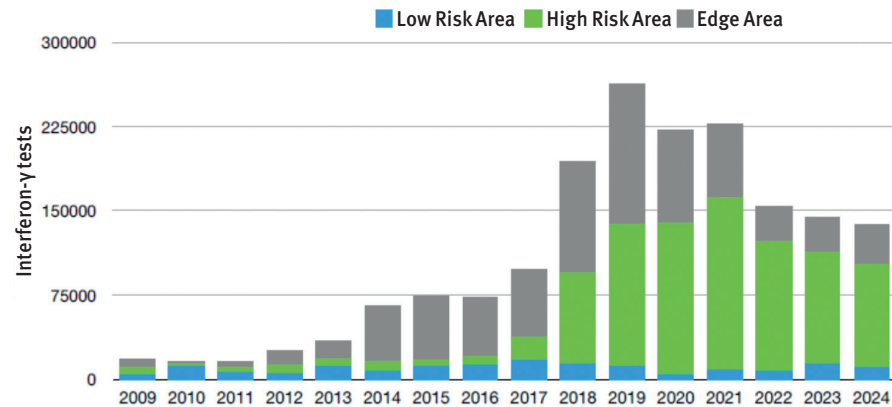


Fig 1: Number of interferon- γ (IFN- γ) tests in England 2009–2024 within the three bovine TB (bTB) risk areas. Source: Surveillance Project SB4008 IFN- γ tests for bTB

eradication will be achieved in England by 2038, or when TB eradication will be achieved.' The 25-year bTB eradication strategy published in 2014,¹⁰ with a 2038 projected target of bTB freedom (elimination or near elimination) now, on current trajectory, has an end point beyond 2060. On that basis, industry disruption, the high welfare concerns and damaging costs are set for decades to come.

There is an urgent need for the use of other immune-assay tests and phage testing to be authorised alongside SICCT and IFN- γ tests, and for farm vets to be provided with extensive new advice and guidance, and the freedom to test out bTB from herds. Otherwise, progress, especially in England, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland simply will not materialise, as it could in relatively few years with a more nuanced approach. The bTB strategy review update is not sufficiently accurate to justify the accompanying Defra request for additional funds.

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References

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“The high welfare concerns and damaging costs are set for decades to come

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- 4 APHA. Bovine TB in cattle: badger control areas monitoring data up to 2023. 2024. <https://bit.ly/4pex0Db> (accessed 11 September 2025)
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- 6 Langton TES. Gamma reactors by cull year 2009–2023. 2025. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.30093889.v1> (accessed 16 September 2025)
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- 8 APHA. Bovine TB: epidemiology reports, 2023. 2024. <https://bit.ly/3KgvzoV> (accessed 11 September 2025)
- 9 APHA. Freedom of information response to L Griffiths. 2025; doi:10.6084/m9.figshare.30093967
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NOTIFIABLE DISEASE

Questioning current disease control strategies

IN a recent issue of *Vet Record*, I was struck by two reports that raise important questions about current disease control strategies.

The first concerned contingency planning for foot-and-mouth disease

Letters are not peer-reviewed, unless stated