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INQUIRY INTO BOVINE TUBERCULOSIS

The Wales Deer Initiative's response to the Environmental, Planning and Countryside Committee of the National Assembly for Wales' inquiry into Bovine Tuberculosis (M.bovis).

The Wales Deer Initiative (WDI) is a wide partnership of statutory, non-statutory, voluntary and private interests. Whilst originally set up by the Forestry Commission, it has a core staff whose activities are both to co-ordinate the relevant activities of the partners and to deliver some functions directly. Clearly the level of core activity of the WDI is proportional to the resources allocated directly to the WDI.

The aim of the WDI is "*to ensure the delivery of a sustainable, well managed wild deer population in Wales*". The staff and finances of the WDI are managed through The Deer Initiative Ltd, a charitable company limited by guarantee, dedicated to supporting the England Deer Initiative and Wales Deer Initiative. The full partners are listed at Annex A.

The partners in the WDI believe that whilst the relationship between deer and sustainable forestry is important, effective deer management can only be achieved by examining also the wider effects on the environment and its biodiversity, agriculture, horticulture, transport, rural and urban living. Thus, though it appropriate for the Forestry Commission to take a major role in promoting deer management, other Governmental and non-governmental bodies must also play their part.

We believe that in future if deer are to be managed well, it must be at a landscape, or at least deer range scale. Cooperative deer management across land holding boundaries is therefore a pre-requisite of effective management.

Science of Bovine Tuberculosis (M. bovis) and wild deer in Wales

It has long been known that wild deer are susceptible to Bovine TB although no research and work has been carried out to assess the significance of Bovine TB in the national wild deer herd particularly in terms of transmission and control of the disease. Reported cases of Bovine TB in wild deer in Wales are extremely rare. (we are only aware of one positive submission in the last 5

years)¹. We are also aware of anecdotal evidence of a higher incidence in Herefordshire but again there has only been one positive submission in the last 5 years².

Wales' wild deer population consisting of fallow, red, roe and muntjac deer (with a very small population of sika in the west) is relatively small compared to those in England and Scotland which may have contributed to the present low risk of Bovine TB in the deer. Forestry Commission Research estimates that the wild deer population in Great Britain will double in the next decade and if this the case the increasing population and the greater spread of wild deer in Wales will inevitably increase as will the risk of the transmission of the disease. In our opinion however, deer densities in Wales Are likely to remain low in comparison with the rest of Great Britain and therefore the risk of widespread TB in the deer in Wales remains extremely low.

Management Controls and Testing Regimes

Despite the low risk, we recognise that Bovine TB in wild deer as well as other wildlife must be monitored and recorded. The Deer Initiative has endorsed the industry led training initiative (the Deer Stalking Certificate (Level 1 & 2) for stalkers, which includes training and assessment on carcass handling and inspection. All trained stalkers should therefore be capable of recognising visible clinical signs of TB and the reporting requirement.

Nevertheless we would also support a more detailed carcass-testing programme to establish the presence or absence of Bovine TB in wild deer in Wales. Negative reports are just as important as positive results as it will allow is to target problem areas in the future. Carcass samples could be provided by a large deer manager such as Forest Enterprise Wales or through the use of carcasses produced as a result of vehicle collisions. The Deer Initiative co-ordinates a Deer-Collisions Project that records deer and vehicle collisions and the WDI has made an application to the Transport Directorate of the National Assembly of Wales to expand the project to Wales on the grounds of road safety although this could link into provide deer carcasses for health and disease monitoring.

Animal Health and welfare, bio-security and animal husbandry

It is essential that the results of wildlife disease research and monitoring alongside education and advice is made available to all those within the animal health system including farmers, stalkers and veterinarians. Where Bovine TB occurs in livestock in Wales anecdotal evidence suggests that farmers may shoot wild deer as they see them as a damage or disease threat and although this link as yet may or may not have been proven the landowner who shoots the deer may be in contravention of The Deer Act 1991 and risk pushing the deer out into other areas increasing the risk of disease transmission.

¹ Pers comms: A Thomas Forest Enterprise

² Current and Future Deer Management Options, Defra January 2004

Currently the WDI is providing advice and information to landowners in order to promote the setting up of a number of Deer Management Groups across Wales to address the need for effective, collaborative deer management at landscape scale. The management of wild deer in Wales is regulated by The Deer Act 1991 and the WDI provides support and encourages the training of landowners and deer management in best practices and these include deer and the law and identifying and monitoring the health of wild deer. This work is vital if we are to achieve our aim of ensuring the delivery of a sustainable, well managed wild deer population in Wales.

Conclusion

We believe that the current level of Bovine TB is extremely low and that despite the projected increase in the size and distribution of the wild deer herd in Wales the threat of increasing levels of Bovine TB will remain low. Nevertheless we believe that a structured monitoring scheme would be useful to confirm this and to help convince farmers and the general public of the low risk. The WDI will continue to ensure that all those involved with wild deer are aware of the threat and are conscious of the need for vigilance to prevent a widespread outbreak of Bovine TB in Wales.

J E Brinton,
WDI Project Officer
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