

National Bovine Tb Pest Management Strategy

Amendment Proposal prepared by the Animal Health Board

Submission of Greater Wellington Regional Council

Introduction

The Greater Wellington Regional Council (Greater Wellington) has been involved in regional implementation of the national programme to control Bovine Tuberculosis in New Zealand since the Council was formed in 1989.

Historically, the Wellington region was one of the worst infected regions in New Zealand peaking at 331 infected herds in June 1994. This was approximately 10% of the total regional cattle and deer herd population at the time.

Requests to Greater Wellington by the Animal Health Board (AHB) to increase funding in the early 1990's were strongly supported by the Council. Greater Wellington recognised that without increased funding the regional situation would only become worse, leading to further negative impacts on the regional economy.

Greater Wellington considered that the national Tb strategy required a strong funding partnership between the Crown, industry and regional council. We also recognised that success of the regional programme was dependent on fostering and maintaining strong working relationships with the AHB, as the responsible management agency under the Biosecurity Act.

There is no doubt that the national strategy has been successfully implemented in the Wellington region. Infected herd numbers totalled only five at June 2009. We recognise the critical roles played by farmers, the AHB,ASUREQuality and Greater Wellington staff in enabling this success to occur.

The Future Role of Greater Wellington

Greater Wellington supports the need for a future national Tb strategy to build on current achievements. However, in recent years there have been significant changes in strategy management roles and responsibilities. From our perspective, these changes do not appear to have resulted in significant improvements to management of the vector control programme. We cannot identify where any financial savings have occurred and we have witnessed poor decision making around programme selection and implementation.

Furthermore, the amended proposal promotes new objectives that seek to

- prevent expansion of current vector risk areas,
- maintain herd infection levels at around 0.4% period prevalence, and
- determine whether eradication of Tb from wildlife is achievable across the total range of NZ environments.

The proposed objectives could potentially result in less vector control expenditure in the Wellington region for many years, slowing down the rate at which current vector risk areas are declared Tb free.

There is no doubt that reduced expenditure will result in increased infected herds over time, particularly in the southern parts of the Wellington region. Our farming community would strongly oppose any increases. Many have only recently started to enjoy economic and environmental benefits after incurring Tb related farming restrictions and costs for the past 30-40 years.

Given these proposed changes, Greater Wellington needs to carefully consider what its future role should be on behalf of its ratepayers.

Historically, Greater Wellington had important roles as a funding partner and in assisting with the development and management of the regional vector control programme. Our ability to influence and shape the regional programme gave the Council confidence that funding provided by our ratepayers was being wisely utilised. Our involvement also enabled a high level of accountability and transparency around programme implementation. In short, our close involvement enabled a strong link to be maintained between the AHB, Greater Wellington and our regional ratepayers.

Under the proposed amended strategy the role of Greater Wellington is suggested to be restricted to that of a funder. We are concerned that our ability to influence the regional programme will be constrained and the benefits of a true partnership with the AHB, on behalf of our ratepayers, steadily eroded.

Greater Wellington considers there are significant benefits to re-establishing and maintaining a partnership with the AHB and with the Crown and industry sectors. Therefore, any funding provided by Greater Wellington towards the proposed new strategy will be on the basis that partnership opportunities are fully explored and, where agreed, strongly committed to by all parties.

The Amendment Proposal – Principles that Underpin Greater Wellington Funding

The Minister will be aware that regional councils have had input into development of the proposed strategy. Greater Wellington, therefore, supports the continuation of a strategy to maintain control of bovine Tb in NZ. However, there are a number of principles that underpin our support.

Whilst we support a future Tb control strategy, Greater Wellington wishes to maximise the potential benefits of integrating pest control programmes undertaken by Crown agencies, councils, community groups and individual landowners. For this reason alone, any Tb strategy needs to be underpinned by a strong partnership between all the affected parties. Simply focusing on our own respective strategy objectives, without considering integrated management and resourcing opportunities, is short sighted and falling short on our duties to our funding communities. NZ is a small country with a small funding base. Greater Wellington sees no reasons why all agencies responsible for pest management should not be able to work closer together on areas of mutual interest and benefit, specifically to align their operations to maximise the benefits of expenditure.

Greater Wellington believes progressing any new strategy would be strengthened by developing a stronger relationship between affected or interested regional councils and the AHB. In our case, we consider this should involve joint approval of the proposed annual vector control programme for the region, regular progress or review meetings and formal annual AHB reports to the Council. Councils are accountable for any funds appropriated from ratepayers for the Tb strategy. We, therefore, need to be fully informed and committed to the approved vector control programme. The AHB also need to be accountable for why and how these funds are spent.

Funds provided by Greater Wellington to the AHB for strategy implementation must be spent solely within the Wellington region. We cannot justify raising funds from landowners, predominantly as exacerbators, if these funds are allocated to works outside the region. Contributing a regional share presumes that the other funding partners (Crown and industries) pay their full share and that the total is spent in the region. Any savings made during implementation of the annual regional vector control programme should be available for re-investment in the programme as a priority.

Greater Wellington is required to give programme and funding certainty to its ratepayers through the LTCCP. Certainty for Tb strategy funding would be enhanced if the AHB were able to provide accurate regional share funding requirements on a rolling three year term that align with our LTCCP reviews.

Greater Wellington has always strongly supported the use of pre or trend monitoring of possum densities to determine whether proposed vector control contracts need to proceed. This investment has historically resulted in significant annual savings for the funding agencies. In many cases these savings were used to speed up the vector control programme, enhancing the rate at which Tb infection declined in the region. Greater Wellington strongly believes that pre or trend monitoring should be a pre-requisite for regional share funding. This opinion is supported by the Wellington Tb Free Committee.

A very important issue confronting Greater Wellington concerns possum / predator control in areas recently declared Tb free under the national Tb strategy. Surveys of landowners in these areas reveal very strong support for ongoing control. Whilst we acknowledge that these areas are no longer a concern under the Tb strategy, we believe they will pose a future Tb risk if possum numbers escalate. The Wellington region, like most others across NZ, suffers from the illegal release of feral pigs and deer. We are aware that many of these animals are being sourced from parts of the region where Tb still exists in the wildlife. It is possible that Tb could reoccur in Tb free areas if infected wildlife are released into these areas, particularly if possum densities are left to increase. Greater

Wellington, therefore, believes there is a need for transitional arrangements with the AHB that supports possum control for an agreed timeframe in areas recently declared Tb free. Like most regional councils, Greater Wellington is under increasing pressure to fund possum / predator control in areas outside the current Tb vector control programme. We cannot afford to maintain the benefits of low possum / predator densities in Tb free areas as well as fund the new Tb strategy. A transitional funding arrangement with the AHB will ensure a partnership is maintained with farmers in Tb Free areas. These farmers will continue to fund the Tb strategy through council rates, industry levies and their own on-farm Tb related costs.

Greater Wellington wishes to be heard in support of this submission.

Fran Wilde

Chair