

Badger cull 'must be extended to 10 counties'

A businessman in charge of hundreds of marksmen said protesters "significantly" disrupted last year's campaign



Trial and tribulation: the antagonism caused by the badger cull was rarely out of the news Photo: Alamy

By Bill Gardner

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The government must extend the badger cull to 10 counties to prevent interference from protesters, a leading figure in the campaign has claimed.

The businessman, who employs hundreds of marksmen to shoot the animals, said activists needed to be more “thinly spread” across the country if the latest trial was to be effective.

This year's controversial badger cull in Somerset and Gloucestershire got underway on Monday evening, the government announced yesterday.

Marksmen are expected to kill just under 1,000 badgers in the two counties this year, in an attempt to prevent the spread of bovine TB in cattle.

Last year, during the first phase of a four year programme, 1,800 badgers were killed in the same pilot areas.

But in August, an independent report by an expert panel into the first year of culling found that

"controlled shooting" could not deliver a reduction in TB in cattle and was not humane.

The businessman, who would not be identified for fear of reprisals, employs hundreds of "decent guys" to shoot and trap the badgers at night.

He said the "only way" this year's trial would succeed was if the government extended the cull to ten counties rather than two.

He said: "It's true that we would have killed significantly higher numbers of badgers last year had the protesters not been there. They tramp around at night and shine torches and make everything very difficult for everyone.

"A lot of my guys are country people, some are town people. Most of them enjoy the stealth of the pursuit. They're not there to cause pain to the badgers.

"The government needs to do everything it can to stop this interference. But you can't really just ban these people from causing trouble.

"The only way to do it is to extend the cull to ten counties. There aren't that many of these people, and they'd soon find it harder to get in the way."

He added: "What is so absolutely sacred about the badger compared to any other animal?"

The four-year government-backed pilot aims to cull 70% of the initial population of badgers to test whether the approach is humane and effective.

However, companies have been licenced to kill a minimum of 615 badgers in Gloucestershire and 316 in Somerset.

The target is to reduce the badger population by 70 per cent in each area, the level that experts say is needed to reduce the rate of TB in cattle.

More than 26,000 cattle were slaughtered in England last year because of the spread of the disease.

But last year, just 48 per cent of the estimated badger population in west Somerset was culled by a combination of shooting and trapping animals, and just 39 per cent in Gloucestershire.

When asked why marksmen failed to reach the target, former environment secretary Owen Paterson said the "badgers moved the goalposts".

Yesterday the group Somerset Against the Badger Cull repeated its opposition to the policy describing it as "pointless, cruel and ineffective".

Environment Secretary Elizabeth Truss said: "We are pursuing a comprehensive strategy supported

by leading vets which includes cattle movement controls, vaccinating badgers in edge areas and culling badgers where the disease is rife.

"This is vital for the future of our beef and dairy industries, and our nation's food security. At present we have the highest rates of bovine TB in Europe.

"Doing nothing is not an option and that is why we are taking a responsible approach to dealing with bovine TB."

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