

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FROM STOCK AGENT MEETINGS

**Introduction** – Stock agents are an important part of the agricultural industry and a key contact with an extensive understanding of the farming community. Their contribution to the *Mycoplasma bovis* Programme is extremely important.

Below is a list of the most common questions and answers regarding *M. bovis* from meetings held with stock agents. Questions and suggestions specifically related to NAIT have been compiled and will be discussed with NAIT through the appropriate channels.

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## Testing for *M. bovis*

### Are healthy animals being culled as well as infected ones?

We have to cull all of the animals in a management group where infection is present. This is because our testing accurately shows if a management group is infected, but doesn't identify if an individual animal is free from infection.

Therefore, we cannot take the 'healthy' or uninfected animals out, and only cull the ones with infection – the entire management group needs to be culled. This is an essential part of achieving eradication.

One of the challenges with *M. bovis* is that the animals can be infected without showing symptoms, as opposed to foot and mouth disease, where animals are clearly sick.

### How accurate is the testing? Why can a herd be cleared when there are animals that have reacted on the test?

The testing regime is very accurate. What's important is the way that we apply the tests and how we interpret the results.

The PCR test finds the DNA of the bacterium. If that test is positive then we know for sure that infection is present in that management group.

However, the bacteria needs to be captured on the swab or in the sample in order for us to test its DNA. Because *M. bovis* 'hides' it isn't always on the swabbed area, or in the tested blood or milk. Therefore, we can't rely on a negative PCR test to say that an individual animal isn't infected.

The other test that we use is the ELISA, which looks for the antibodies an animal produces if it is infected.

We expect a low number of 'false detects' every time we test with ELISA. That is – a small number of animals will react, but won't actually be infected. We apply the ELISA test over multiple animals, and sometimes test multiple times over a period of time, to get a clear picture of the entire management group. Our epidemiologists review the results of all of the animals to determine if the group is infected.

That is why we can say that a management group isn't infected, even if it had a small number of cattle that reacted on the test.

### How accurate is the Bulk Tank Milk Surveillance (BTMS) testing?

The BTMS is a screening test which will miss very few infected farms, but will capture a high number of farms that aren't infected. Out of the farms that have a detect result, we expect less than 10 percent of them will be infected.

BTMS is a very powerful tool, as it finds infected farms before we can find them by tracing animal movements. This means they get locked down sooner, and there is less opportunity for infection to spread off them and affect other farms.

### Is it possible for farmers (especially for service bull providers) to have animals tested in order to certify their herd as clear of *M. bovis*?

Farmers can have their animals commercially tested with PCR. However, this usually requires nasal swabbing of tonsils, and is not easily done with large dangerous bulls. Further, the test doesn't reliably indicate that the animal isn't infected – only that the test was negative. The animal could be infected, but not have the infection present in its tonsils.

### Has there been any seasonal variation in testing/results observed?

No, we have not seen any seasonal variation in test results. There are times when animals are under more stress, and if infected they are more likely to shed bacteria during those times.

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### **Is the number of test kits available a constraint to the Programme?**

No. Early on in the Programme a short-term shortage of test kits caused slight delays in the testing of samples. However, since we have begun using the IDvet kit, a shortage of kits hasn't been an issue.

### **There are reports of a vaccination for *M. bovis* that exists overseas? Why is this not used as part of the Programme?**

While there are vaccines overseas, they are not very effective and aren't commonly used. Allowing a vaccine to be used to try to protect herds in NZ would not be very effective, and would produce the antibodies which we test for to find the disease, thereby confusing the testing programme.

## **Our processes**

### **Why are farms under Active Surveillance not required to notify potential purchasers of stock of their status?**

Farms are placed under Active Surveillance if they have a low risk that they could have been exposed to *M. bovis*. This is very different to farms put under a NOD, who have animals on the property that have been exposed to *M. bovis*, or have a Bulk Tank Milk detect result.

It is the difference between a low risk that they could have been exposed, versus knowing that they have been exposed.

The Active Surveillance testing should be thought of as precautionary. There is no suspicion that the animals on these properties are infected but it is important that we test these properties so that they can be ruled out.

Due to the low risk, restricting these farms would be unreasonable. Further, we have no legal powers to require them to notify people that their stock are under surveillance.

### **What are the timeframes for following up on movements from Confirmed Properties to other properties?**

We aim to restrict trace animals, and the management groups they are in, within one month of identifying them, however this is an ambitious timeframe.

When we find a new infected property we trace all of the animal movements off that farm during the period that we believe it was infected. Sometimes that 'infection window' is quite large, and we need to look at movements that happened a long time ago. This is becoming less common, as we catch up with the spread of the disease.

### **Why do we not put properties under a Notice of Direction as soon as there is a 'detect' result from the Bulk Tank Milk testing to avoid the sale of calves from these dairy herds?**

We do now. While there was a delay in putting NODs on the first BTMS results from autumn this year – now we put a NOD on a farm with a detect result within two to three weeks of the sample being taken (allowing time for testing, confirmation, and contacting the farmer).

### **Why is there a delay in lifting a Notice of Direction once negative results have been given to a farmer?**

For a Notice of Direction to be lifted, we would require the following criteria to be met:

- No at-risk animals alive on the property
- At least one negative round of on-farm testing
- A census to be carried out to identify all animals on the property which has been reviewed to ensure there are no further animals of interest.

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- If there are positive results from a round of on-farm testing then we would require two rounds of negative results before the Notice of Direction is lifted.

Delays can happen at any stage in this process.

### **How can we explain that there are farms that have tested positive for *M. bovis* that have no known connections with previous positive farms?**

There are very few Confirmed Properties that do not have a known link back to another Confirmed Property, and we believe that those few are linked, but that inaccurate records prevent us from finding the connection.

Some BTMS farms will not have known links yet, as we will have found them before we have identified the animal movements that infected them.

### **Has the use of other labs been considered in order to speed up result turnaround?**

We use multiple labs already. It is vital that all labs that we use meet the strictest standards, so that all results are reliable.

### **Has the possibility of making the use of veterinarians as a resource for *M. bovis* testing been explored?**

The *M. bovis* Programme has used clinical vets since the beginning of the Programme. Using vets to conduct on farm sampling does happen, but doesn't always speed the process up that much, as vets themselves have limited extra capacity. Using our dedicated teams ensures consistency and quality control.

### **Why did MPI not make the decision to shut down the Cook Strait to avoid the spread of *M. bovis* to the North Island?**

The economic impact of stopping all cattle movements across the Cook Strait would have been enormous and out of proportion. Further, the disease had been spreading for 18 months before it was detected, and it was highly likely that it was already in the North Island.

In March 2018 there was a project called 'Operation Cook Strait' which was aimed at ensuring animals that were being transported to the North Island were properly registered in order to avoid the spread of the disease through unregistered cattle movements.

### **Why is it not a legal requirement that processing plants accept cattle from properties under movement controls?**

We don't have the legal power to require that under existing legislation. The Programme works closely with processing plants to process and sample cattle from properties under movement controls.

## **Disease transmission**

### **How did *M. bovis* get into the country and what will be done to avoid it coming in again? Have there been any changes to importing standards considering the risk that imported semen poses?**

There was a detailed investigation into the possible ways that the bacteria could have entered New Zealand, but we have not identified which it was. It is very unusual to find a smoking gun for a biosecurity incursion.

The importing standards have been reviewed and no changes were considered necessary to date. It is up to industry and government to decide together if importing germplasm is worth the (small) biosecurity risk it presents.

**Due to changes that were made around requirements for cleaning and disinfection that take place on farms under movement controls, is there a need to review some current recommended biosecurity guidelines?**

We took a very cautious approach when *M. bovis* was first found, and lightened the requirements when we had better information about the risk.

We're confident that our current guidelines for general on-farm biosecurity, and cleaning and disinfection on affected farms are appropriate, including installation of double fences, and footbaths at both saleyards and for visitors entering and leaving farms.

**Based on communication around how *M. bovis* is spread, is testing carried out on cattle that come into contact at saleyards?**

The disease is transmitted through cattle drinking milk from an infected animal, and direct prolonged contact between animals. It is considered extremely unlikely that the disease will be spread via cattle that share a pen or truck with an infected animal. Prolonged contact over a period of days rather than hours between animals is deemed necessary for the disease to be transmitted.

**Has *M. bovis* affected any 'pure' beef operations or only those that source calves from dairy herds?**

A small number of 'pure' beef operations have seen infection, but due to links to dairy farms, or bull beef animals. Over half of the Confirmed Properties for *M. bovis* to date have been beef operations, with the vast majority of those being bull beef that have a link to a dairy farm. There have been some instances of the disease being transmitted from one beef operation to another, but always with the origin being linked to a dairy farm.

**Do buffalo present a risk for the transmission of *M. bovis*?**

Buffalo do present a potential risk for transmitting *M. bovis*. For this reason buffalo that have been in contact with infected or at-risk animals will be tested.

## **General**

**What assurances can we ask farmers for that their animals are not of interest to the *M. bovis* Programme? What is the value of the Bulk Tank Milk non-detect letters?**

Stock agents can and should ask farmers for as much information as possible about the health status of their stock. However, there is no way of knowing in advance if animals might become of interest to the Programme later on (i.e. a new property is found to be infected, and those animals were at some stage exposed to that property).

Farmers who have had stock test clear for *M. bovis*, either under Active Surveillance or a Notice of Direction are provided with a letter stating that the tests were clear, and that the animals are no longer of interest to the *M. bovis* Programme at that time.

Farms that are currently under a NOD cannot move or trade the at risk animals.

Farms that have cattle under Active Surveillance should share this information with stock agents.

Bulk Tank Milk Surveillance 'non-detect' letters are of no value at all for determining disease status. They are a screen, and a snapshot in time. They do not show that animals are not infected, nor that they haven't been infected since the sample was taken. They should not be used to make decisions about animal health.

**Is information available in hard copy as well as online?**

All of the information that the Programme provides is available online and in hard copy. To request hard copies please contact our liaison team at 0800 00 83 33 or [mbovis2017\\_liaison@mpi.govt.nz](mailto:mbovis2017_liaison@mpi.govt.nz).

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**To reduce the impact on farmers who are informed that they have at-risk animals on farm, is there the possibility of moving these animals onto properties that permanently remain under restrictions?**

No. The at risk-animals may have spread the infection to the other cattle on the farm, and the farm needs to be put under restrictions while testing is completed.

All trace animals are slaughtered, as they have been part of an infected herd – so they will be culled as soon as the first round of on-farm testing is done.

There is an option to move cattle under certain circumstances to a new property under movement restrictions.

**Who is responsible for animal welfare when a property is under movement controls, and what processes are in place to address animal welfare issues, especially when a farmer is clearly struggling with the stress of the situation?**

The PICA (Person in Charge of Animals) always retains their responsibility for Animal Welfare, including when they are under restrictions. The *M. bovis* Programme field staff will support them to meet these obligations.

**Is there the possibility of contacting somebody locally instead of calling through the MPI 0800 number?**

In order to maintain a consistent point of contact, the best method is to go through the 0800 00 83 33 line and ask directly for the *M. bovis* liaison team or alternatively email [mbovis2017\\_liaison@mpi.govt.nz](mailto:mbovis2017_liaison@mpi.govt.nz).

The liaison team will ensure that the most appropriate people get back in touch (which could include regional staff) and someone will follow up in a timely manner.

**What is the timeline for eradication?**

We expect to have found the majority of infected properties by the end of 2020. This will be followed by a long-term surveillance programme of at least eight years.

**Of the total budget announced, how much has been spent so far?**

Programme expenditure as of 16 August 2019 is \$189.8 million. This figure includes setting up and running the response (and then the Programme), equipment, staff, training, buildings, vehicles, contractors, public meetings and engagement, paying operational costs, etc. At 21 October 2019 \$100 million has been paid in compensation to farmers.

**It appears that there are some vets who are basing their advice to farmers on outdated information regarding the transmission risks of *M. bovis*. How does MPI ensure that vets are informed about *M. bovis* and changes to the Programme?**

The Programme works closely with the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) to keep them up-to-date with the latest information and changes to our understanding of such things as transmission risks of *M. bovis*. Vets have the opportunity to discuss technical questions with vets who are part of the Programme. There are also several vets who work for the Programme, and who organise meetings with external vets to address such issues.

**Is it possible to produce a simple communication around changes since the beginning of the Programme?**

The Programme is regularly changing and updating its approach, and at any single point in time communication could quickly get out of date. We are committed to regularly talking to interested parties and making sure they're up to date on how the Programme is operating.

Stock agents are encouraged to contact our Liaison team if they have questions or are uncertain about any aspect of the Programme.

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### **Are beef farmers eligible for compensation for the loss of beef production?**

Yes – There is a [fact sheet](#) on the MPI website under the compensation section, with frequently asked questions for a variety of scenarios where farmers may be eligible for compensation.

For help in submitting a claim, it's recommended that farmers contact the compensation assistance team that is independently run by DairyNZ and Beef and Lamb New Zealand (DBCAT). A DBCAT rep can assist farmers, and help them understand eligibility criteria and how to apply for compensation. DBCAT is a free service that can be contacted on 0800 32 22 81 or by email on [dbcats@dairynz.co.nz](mailto:dbcats@ dairynz.co.nz) or [dbcats@beeflambnz.com](mailto:dbcats@beeflambnz.com).

### **Is there the possibility to submit a claim to be compensated for the loss of earnings through lost sales due to *M. bovis*?**

All claims are assessed on their own merits and it is difficult to give definitive answers to hypothetical cases. However, an anticipated commission for a cancelled sale is very unlikely to meet the criteria for compensation as a third party is not directly affected by MPI exercising its powers under the Biosecurity Act, i.e. the agent's property was not destroyed and no restrictions were placed on their goods.

However, if any person believes they have suffered a loss as a result of MPI's exercise of powers, they have the right to submit a claim that will be assessed under the relevant provisions in the Act. Discussing contracts with farmers and how biosecurity incursions are managed, including *M. bovis*, may make this process easier going forward.

### **Does MPI have oversight over NAIT?**

NAIT is a Limited Liability Company which is owned by OSPRI. OSPRI's Board is made up of DairyNZ, Beef + Lamb New Zealand, Deer Industry New Zealand, and the Ministry for Primary Industries.

MPI is responsible for enforcing NAIT compliance, and OSPRI is responsible for administering the NAIT system.

The *M. bovis* Programme meets with NAIT regularly to make sure that we are working closely together.