I would like to update members on the Welsh Government’s refreshed TB Eradication Programme.

Our 2012 Framework for bovine TB eradication in Wales comes to an end this year. It is time to take stock, reflect on our successes, learn lessons and consider a refreshed approach.

Since 2012 we have seen a downward trend in the number of new cases of bovine TB in cattle herds in Wales.

The number of new TB incidents has fallen by 19% compared to the same period last year. Additionally, the number of herds under TB restrictions has fallen by 10%. The increase in the number of cattle slaughtered in Wales because of TB is primarily due to increased targeted use of the gamma-interferon blood test to help clear infection in recurrent and persistent breakdowns.

To illustrate we are seeing an improving situation, in comparison to the same period last year, 68 fewer herds are under TB restrictions because of a TB incident in Wales.

Further, the latest figures show the number of new TB incidents is currently at its lowest level in 10 years.

I am keen to build on this success and speed up progress with a set of evidence-based, enhanced measures. We must focus on our long term objective of TB eradication.

Our approach to disease eradication has focused on all sources of TB infection, including cattle to cattle and wildlife spread of TB and will continue to do so.
The refreshed programme contains a comprehensive and coherent suite of measures including:

- a new, regional approach to the eradication of TB with 3 categories of areas based on TB incidence;
- strengthening of cattle controls;
- wildlife measures; and
- changes to compensation;

We will also be revisiting our programme governance.

Today I am launching a 12 week consultation on our refreshed approach. I would like all parties who are affected by bovine TB or have an interest in our Programme to consider our proposals and provide comments which will help shape our plans.

We have now completed almost 7 years of annual herd testing, which continues to identify infection early and provides an invaluable dataset demonstrating the differing disease picture across Wales. I intend to maintain annual herd testing for as long as necessary.

We know from the TB Dashboard, disease incidence is not uniform across Wales and there are different drivers of the disease in each area.

As I explained in the debate last month, we are now in a position to take a more regionalised approach to TB eradication measures. We will use 3 categories of area across Wales, low, intermediate and high TB incidence.

For each area, we will tailor our approach to reflect the disease conditions and risks. We want to protect the Low TB Area and drive down incidence in the Intermediate and High TB Areas. In order to achieve these goals, the measures to be deployed in each area must be targeted and proportionate and I would like to hear stakeholder’s views on our proposals which will contribute to our long term objective of TB eradication.

We have been targeting herds which have been under TB restrictions for over 18 months with enhanced measures. We are now extending this to include problem areas and herds suffering recurring TB breakdowns. All of these ‘chronic’ breakdown herds will have individual, bespoke action plans, developed in partnership with the farmer, vet and APHA, aimed at clearing up infection. These action plans will include measures such as increased sensitivity and frequency of testing and removing Inconclusive Reactors.

The top 10 longest ongoing TB breakdowns alone have cost the Government over £10m in compensation since 2009. Some of these herds have been under TB restrictions for more than 10 years. It is anticipated that expanding this aspect of the Programme will target disease in these chronic breakdowns and reduce the overall weight of infection.

I am also seeking views on imposing compensation penalties for animals moved within a multi-site restricted holding in chronic herd breakdowns, if they are subsequently
slaughtered as a result of TB. We already reduce compensation in cases where cattle are brought into a restricted herd under licence in order to better share the financial risk, whilst helping farmers stay in business.

This approach will further strengthen our Programme by managing the disease risk posed by certain movements of cattle within a holding.

The majority of farmers comply with the TB rules, however, those who do not should be penalised because they are putting our aims on TB Eradication at risk. I am, therefore, considering applying penalties to CAP subsidy payments for certain breaches of the TB Order.

Linking behaviours and compliance with the rules to financial penalties is already embedded within our Programme. Farmers must accept that there will be financial consequences if they do not follow the requirements.

Farmers should always consider risk when purchasing cattle. Informed Purchasing schemes have made a significant contribution to TB eradication in Australia and New Zealand. These countries are leading the way in TB Eradication and we must continue to learn lessons from them and replicate the most useful controls.

To help farmers make informed decisions about the health of the cattle they wish to purchase, I am considering the proposal to make an Informed Purchasing scheme mandatory in Wales.

There is evidence in some chronic herd breakdowns, wildlife is involved in the disease transmission process. I have asked officials to engage with vets and wildlife experts to develop ways to break the transmission cycle in chronic herd breakdowns where it can be demonstrated badgers are contributing to the problem.

I will be clear we will continue to rule out an English style cull of badgers, with farmers free-shooting infected and healthy badgers themselves. However, a range of other options are available, including learning from the pilot in Northern Ireland. This involves cage trapping badgers and humane killing of infected animals. In high incidence areas where there is a chronic herd breakdown and where we have objective confirmation badgers are infected, we are considering whether a similar approach might be acceptable and appropriate, working with vets and wildlife experts.

Vaccination still has a role to play in our approach to TB eradication and the availability of badger vaccine is something I am closely monitoring. Vaccine specifically for use in badgers will not be available in 2017. The availability of other vaccine is still an option we are exploring. However, it is premature to think about the future deployment of the vaccine until we know exactly when the supply will be restored.

Every farm, without exception, whether it has suffered a TB breakdown or not, should always follow good biosecurity and husbandry practices. Biosecurity is key in protecting
animals from bovine TB and other serious animal diseases and farmers should be able to assess their risk.

Working with farmers and their vets and building on our earlier work in this area, I intend to develop a single, standardised biosecurity scoring tool which can be used by every farmer to assess levels of biosecurity on their farms.

I am seeking views on reducing the TB compensation cap to £5,000. This cap will not affect the majority of farmers. Based on the figures from last year, a cap of £5,000 would affect 1% of cattle valued, but would offer savings in the region of £300,000 a year.

The purpose of the cap is to protect the Welsh Government in relation to the cost of the highest value animals. Since 2011, valuations for pedigree cattle have been around twice as much as the average market value. This suggests, despite the measures we have in place, overcompensation is occurring in some instances.

Finally, I propose to revisit the governance of the TB Eradication Programme. The current Programme structure has been in place since 2008, and with the new regionalised approach to TB eradication and launch of a reflect approach, this is the right time to review the governance arrangements of our Programme.

Following the consultation, I will consider all responses and officials will draw up a revised programme of activities. I intend to publish this refreshed TB Eradication Programme in the spring with a view to the new measures being introduced from April 2017.

This refreshed TB Eradication Programme will put us in a stronger position to ensure we continue to make progress towards a TB Free Wales.

Embargoed until after Lesley Griffiths, Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs has delivered the statement.