# Ireland faces rising bovine TB crisis amid environmental and economic challenges



As Ireland approaches the late 2020s, concerns are mounting within the agricultural community and government regarding the evolving challenges posed by bovine tuberculosis (TB) and their implications on national farming and environmental policy. The Irish agricultural sector is contending with a complex interplay between disease management, environmental regulations, and economic pressures, all converging to create a precarious outlook for farmers and policymakers alike.

Bovine TB Trends and Government Response

Data from recent years illustrate a worrying trajectory in bovine TB cases. Official figures reveal reactor numbers escalating sharply from 22,393 in 2022 to 28,901 in 2023, and further surging to 41,630 in 2024. By 2025, cases neared 60,000 reactors, prompting the Minister for Agriculture to introduce more stringent restrictions. These measures included extending the minimum period a herd remains under restriction from 120 days to 240 days, and instituting a requirement for two consecutive clear tests, six months apart, before lifting restrictions.

The impact of intensified control measures yielded a reduction in new cases, with additional reactors dropping to 7,000 in 2026 and projected to fall to 5,000 by the end of 2027. Nonetheless, this still equates to an estimated 72,000 total cases spread across approximately 10,000 herds, many of which remain under prolonged restrictions.

Nitrates Derogation Under Pressure

This rise in TB and prolonged herd restrictions have significant ramifications beyond animal health. Many affected herds are availing of the nitrates derogation, which currently permits the application of 220kg/ha of nitrogen. However, herds under TB restriction, unable to sell animals during this time, partially retain organic nitrogen, influencing Ireland’s overall organic nitrogen inventory.

Brussels has expressed dissatisfaction with this situation, viewing it as a possible circumvention of obligations under the nitrates directive. The European Union's scrutiny creates risk that Ireland may lose its nitrates derogation — a critical allowance that was successfully renegotiated in 2025 but now faces jeopardy due to the unintended consequences of the TB outbreak.

Economic and Emotional Costs

The financial implications of controlling bovine TB are escalating sharply. In 2024, expenditure on TB control by the Department of Agriculture exceeded €100 million for the first time. With the prospect of more reactor cattle and increased beef prices driving up compensation costs, these outlays are expected to surge further in subsequent years.

Farmers are bearing not only financial burdens but also profound emotional and psychological strains. The lengthy restrictions, loss of valuable breeding stock, and impact on farm productivity contribute to declining morale and mental wellbeing among rural communities.

Divergent Views on Disease Transmission and Control Strategies

A significant challenge hampering TB control is the absence of consensus between the Department of Agriculture and farmer representatives on the principal sources of infection and effective interventions.

The Department maintains that bovine-to-bovine transmission is the chief driver of the disease’s resurgence, with dairy expansion amplifying risks due to larger herd sizes and increased cattle interactions, especially in shared facilities such as collecting yards and parlours.

Conversely, farmers emphasise wildlife reservoirs, particularly badgers and sika deer, as critical contributors to ongoing infections. The Institute of Farmers’ Associations (IFA) estimates that badger populations are twice those reported by official sources, highlighting discrepancies in wildlife data. Farmers argue that wildlife control measures remain inadequate and point to the invasive nature of sika deer, which have notably expanded their range into previously deer-free farming areas.

Voices from the Farming Community

Wicklow dairy farmer Chris Fox, speaking at an Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association (ICMSA) TB meeting, underscored the necessity of addressing wildlife in tandem with cattle infection controls. "We as farmers are prepared to accept pain on our part to bring TB under control. But if pain is inflicted on us, without tackling wildlife at the same time, that pain will be for nothing, because the cattle population will be re-infected with the disease by wildlife over and over again."

The spread of sika deer has resulted in tangible agricultural impacts, including widespread damage to tree planting efforts and pasture. One farmer characterised sika deer as “like grey squirrels and Japanese knotweed - an invasive species,” calling for their eradication due to threats to native red deer and their role in TB transmission.

Current wildlife management practices, including controlled shooting under licences, primarily target stags and have been criticised by farmers for lacking efficacy. Many contend that current culling does little to reduce overall deer populations or TB transmission risks.

Badger management presents further complexity due to their protected status and limitations on population control methods. Initial optimism surrounding badger vaccination is now tempered by evidence suggesting temporary vaccine efficacy.

Preventative Measures and Future Directions

Despite these challenges, there are recognised biosecurity practices that can mitigate infection risk. These include raised water troughs to prevent contamination by badgers, perimeter fencing to reduce contact between neighbouring herds, strict disinfection protocols for all farm visitors, and careful management of cattle movements, notably at marts.

The Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF) is exploring genetic strategies, having identified significant variability in TB susceptibility among progeny of different bulls, with infection rates ranging from 4% to 30%. The Department of Agriculture is advocating for the utilisation of this genetic information to reduce disease incidence, a move welcomed by farmers.

The divergence of perspectives between policymakers and farmers, alongside the growing scale of the problem, suggests that bovine TB could emerge as a pressing political and economic issue for the Ministry of Agriculture in the coming years.

Conclusion

Ireland’s agricultural sector stands at a critical juncture where disease control, environmental obligations, and economic sustainability intersect. The escalation of bovine TB cases, intensified herd restrictions, and associated impacts on nitrogen management present multifaceted challenges. Ongoing debates over disease transmission pathways and control measures, coupled with the financial and emotional costs borne by farmers, underscore the complexity of addressing bovine TB in Ireland's farming landscape as the country moves closer to 2030.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.agriland.ie/farming-news/tb-5122-herds-restricted-over-12-months-to-end-of-q1-2024/> - Corroborates the rising TB herd incidence (4.99% in Q1 2024) and reactor numbers (30,332 reactors removed in 12 months to Q1 2024), supporting claims of escalating bovine TB cases and prolonged restrictions.
* <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10318757/> - Validates the financial burden of TB control, with program costs reaching €97 million in 2020, and highlights the historical context of expenditure growth (€82 million in 2015 to €97 million in 2020).
* <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2024/11/07/incidence-of-bovine-tb-have-increased-in-past-12-months-say-department-of-agriculture-experts/> - Confirms increased TB incidence in 2024 (5,906 herds affected) and aligns with claims about rising reactor numbers and departmental focus on stricter control measures.
* <https://www.teagasc.ie/news--events/daily/dairy/trends-in-tb-reducing-risk-for-dairy-herds.php> - Substantiates discussions on biosecurity measures (e.g., raised water troughs, perimeter fencing) and dairy herd risks due to larger herd sizes, aligning with claims about disease transmission pathways.
* <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/tb-still-increase-northern-ireland> - Provides context on TB trends in Northern Ireland (86 cases in 2024), indirectly supporting the broader regional challenge of TB management discussed in the article.