Britain begins massive badger cull amid bovine TB fears

August 27 2013

A woman in badger costume looks toward the Houses of Parliament in London, on June 5, 2013, during a day of opposition to the government's badger cull plans. A cull of thousands of badgers aimed at combating tuberculosis in cattle has begun in Britain, the National Farmers' Union said, sparking anger among animal rights activists.

A cull of thousands of badgers aimed at combating tuberculosis in cattle has begun in Britain, the National Farmers' Union said Tuesday, sparking anger among animal rights activists.

Some 5,000 of the black-and-white creatures are set to be shot under two pilot programmes in southwest England aimed at stopping the spread of TB in cattle.

The National Farmers' Union (NFU) claims the controversial cull will save tens of thousands of cows from being slaughtered by limiting the spread of the disease from badgers.

But Britain's biggest animal charity, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), said many of the badgers would suffer a slow, painful death and that the cull would "not solve the problems caused by this devastating disease".

A dozen protesters have begun set up "Camp Badger" at Doniford Holt in Somerset, southwest England, vowing to stop the cull from taking place.

The activists have started patrolling the countryside in a bid to prevent marksmen from shooting at the animals.

"We are just normal, peaceful people who are outraged," said one protester who gave her name as Carla.

The environmental agency Natural England issued a licence allowing farmers to cull badgers in parts of Somerset and neighbouring Gloucestershire from June 1.

Demonstrators wearing badger masks take part in a 'Badger flashmob' action in London on October 21, 2012, to protest against the government's plans to cull thousands of badgers. A cull of thousands of badgers aimed at combating tuberculosis in cattle has begun in Britain, the National Farmers' Union said, sparking anger among animal rights activists.

The pilot schemes were due to begin late last year but were delayed after condemnation by wildlife experts and a high-profile campaign led by Queen guitarist Brian May.

NFU president Peter Kendall said farmers recognised that the cull was divisive, but said it was necessary to combat a disease that has cost the taxpayer £500 million ($775 million, 580 million euros) over the last decade.

"We understand passions run high, but we'd ask (protesters) to remember not just the 5,000 badgers we're talking about culling in these two pilot areas, but the 38,000 cattle slaughtered," he said.

Some farming families have seen "many generations' work" destroyed by bovine TB, he added, which he said caused huge "emotional damage".

But the RSPCA raised fears that the methods used for the cull could be inhumane.

"It is very likely that many of them are lying injured, suffering a painful death," said Gavin Grant, the charity's chief executive.

"The most tragic thing is that this suffering is so needless. Science has shown that this cull is not the answer to bovine TB in cattle," he added, saying vaccination is a better means of tackling the epidemic.

But environment minister Owen Paterson insisted that no effective vaccine currently exists against bovine TB.

"We are working on new badger and cattle vaccines, but they are years away from being ready and we cannot afford to wait while TB gets worse," he said.

If successful, the government plans to roll out the cull in other rural areas hit badly by bovine TB.

© 2013 AFP