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Mrs Janet Davies AM
Chair
Audit Committee
National Assembly for Wales
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Date 29th June 2005
Our reference JC0052/fgb
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Dear Chair,

30 JUN 2005

**UPDATE ON THE WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE
AUDIT COMMITTEE REPORT ON COMPENSATING FARMERS FOR BOVINE
TUBERCULOSIS**

I write to update the Committee about the Welsh Assembly Government's progress in reducing the backlog of overdue TB tests following the introduction of new testing arrangements in November 2004. The Committee requested such an update at its meeting of 2 December.

In short, there has been an improvement in the position, with the number of overdue tests following a downward trend, but I am concerned that such progress may not continue during the coming summer.

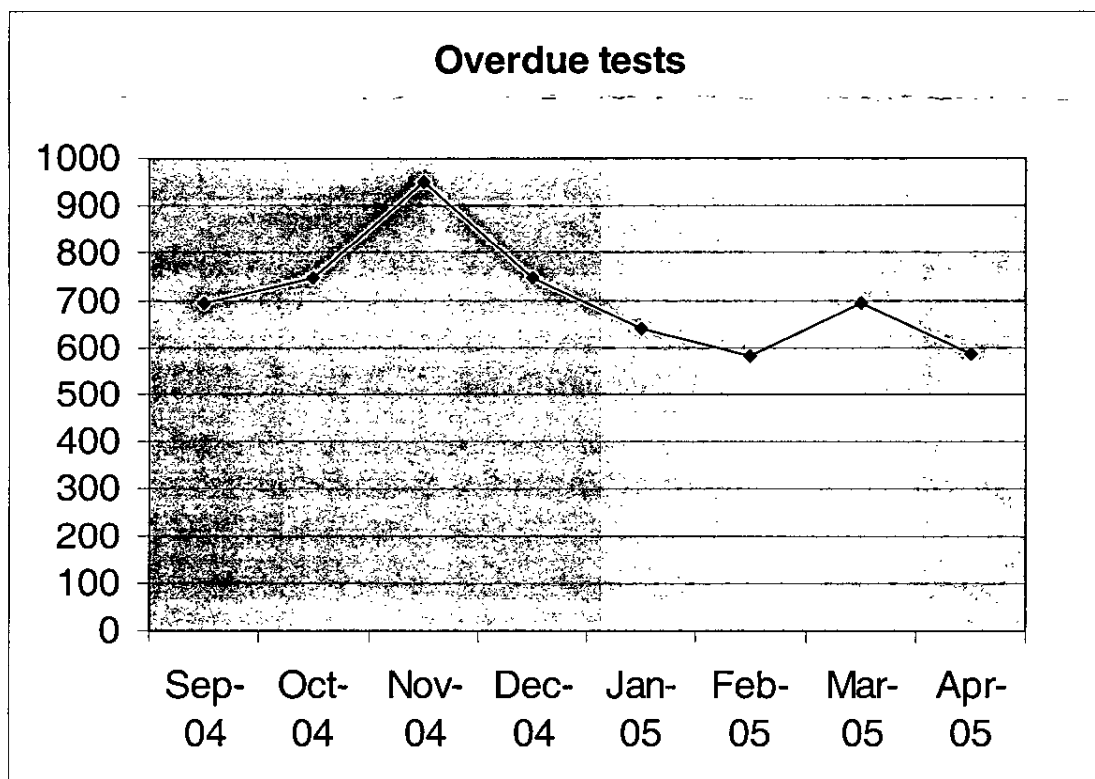
When my predecessor published his report, *Compensating Farmers for bovine tuberculosis*, he reported that the backlog in testing for tuberculosis had peaked at 5,305 tests in February 2002 in the wake of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. By March 2003, the backlog had reduced to 794 tests, of which eight per cent had been overdue by more than one year. Sir John wrote on 24 November 2004 to the Committee to report the progress made by the Welsh Assembly Government in implementing the Committee's recommendations. He noted that the backlog had increased from 600 overdue tests at the end of September 2003 to 695 by the end of September 2004.

In November 2004, the Welsh Assembly Government announced a number of new measures to enhance existing TB controls, including a more rigorous testing regime in which tests, due after 16 February 2005, have to take place within a prescribed 'testing window'. Failure to arrange testing within that period results in immediate restrictions on the movement of animals. The Welsh Assembly

Government informed my staff that it believed that such a regime would accelerate testing and quickly reduce the backlog of tests in Wales.

The latest figures for April 2005 show the number of tests overdue at that date as 587, a fall of 38 per cent from November 2004, when the new testing regime was introduced. Figure 1 shows that, although there have been fluctuations in the number of overdue tests in recent months, there has been a downward trend since November 2004. Divisional Veterinary Managers attribute the sharp increase in overdue tests in March 2005 to the introduction across England and Wales in February 2005 of the 'zero tolerance' policy referred to above, whereby immediate movement restrictions are applied to herds as soon as tests became overdue. This policy, which aims to reduce the risk of bovine tuberculosis spreading to areas with low incidence, has placed considerable pressures on local veterinary practices to complete tests on time.

Figure 1: overdue tests for bovine tuberculosis, September 2004 to April 2005



Source: Figures supplied to the Wales Audit Office by the Welsh Assembly Government

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Although the number of overdue tests has reduced and the new testing arrangements appear to be contributing to this reduction, the extent of the backlog remains a cause for concern, especially because the rate of testing can be expected to fall during the coming summer. In the summer months farmers disperse cattle across their land, and silaging and harvesting also render testing less convenient.

The State Veterinary Service recently ran a national recruitment exercise for casual veterinary officers to be placed in the divisions most affected by bovine tuberculosis and overdue tests. Consequently, three casual veterinary officers have now been recruited to the Cardiff and Carmarthen Animal Health Division offices.

Yours sincerely,


Jeremy Colman
Auditor General for Wales