

P-06-1332 Fund vaccine research to protect red squirrels from deadly Squirrelpox virus, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 03.05.23

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Jack Sargeant MS
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Cardiff Bay
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Date 3/5/23

Dear Mr Sargeant,

P-06-1332: Petitioner's Submission for Petitions Committee Meeting 15th May 2023

Thank you for the email from the Committee Clerk dated 2nd May 2023. I note the enclosure of a letter dated 28th April 2023 to you from Julie James, Minister for Climate Change (Ref: J/00785/23).

My petition was signed by over 11,000 people and calls for the Welsh Government to fund research into a squirrelpox vaccine.

The Minister's letter kindly acknowledges the work undertaken by the 'Squirrel groups' which would include both Clocaenog Red Squirrels Trust (RSTW) (Charity 1186829, registered 2019) and Red Squirrels Trust Wales (Company Limited by Guarantee 06248674, registered 2007).

The letter goes on to state that, '*We [Welsh Government] are grateful for the expert advice of the Wales Squirrel Forum to help us ensure... red squirrels are given the chance to thrive.*'

Although the letter does not expressly state that the Welsh Government see the Wales Squirrel Forum as the setting for discussion and subsequent advice to them on vaccine, it would appear to be suggesting this course.

This would be far from satisfactory.

Petitions arise from a public recognition of, for example, a failing, an omission, an opportunity, a call for change. It would be very easy for Government to respond to virtually every imaginable petition call by simply referring the matter to an existing advisory group and making no wider response.

Wales Squirrel Forum

The Wales Squirrel Forum is chaired by Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and has representatives on it from Welsh Government. It has had over a decade to move vaccine research on and has not done so. It has had over a decade to develop a strategy for managing squirrelpox outbreaks and has yet to do so.

The reality is that national understanding of squirrelpox in Wales, and our evolving regional response to outbreaks has come about via collaborative scientific research outputs produced through Bangor University partnerships and not those of the Forum. This research has relied upon volunteers monitoring red squirrels, collecting bodies, responding to reports of sick animals, posting bodies to pathologists etc. I suspect these individuals would be deeply disappointed in a letter from the Minister that appears so singularly non-committal.

Further, volunteers have raised the majority of the funding for red squirrel conservation in North Wales for the 2020-2025 period: NRW North East will contribute £50K, Clocaenog Trust £30K and RSTW £150K and this is matched by £500K from Heritage Fund (HF). The HF element was a three year application process again shouldered by volunteers. They invested hundreds of hours of personal time to create the 'Magical Mammals' project. During the application process there was a massive squirrelpox outbreak in Gwynedd which killed 70-80% of the animals. Volunteers saw much of their hard work in restoring red squirrel undone but were undaunted because they have no choice but to be stoic.

I mention the above as important context because there was huge support for the petition from volunteers on Anglesey and in North Wales. I was also struck by the how many volunteer led red squirrel conservation groups in England shared and signed too. These groups undertake 90% of the grey squirrel control in England to save red squirrels.

Vaccine

As I wrote recently in 'Bylines Cymru' (27/3/23):

[<https://bylines.cymru/environment/squirrelpox-endangers-red-squirrels-and-livelihoods/>]

'In 2017, the Director of the UK Squirrel Accord, an umbrella body of 41 conservation and forestry organisations, Government agencies, and companies, with links to voluntary red squirrel conservation groups, stated publicly that they had secured £250,000 of funding to restart research. It was suggested that half the funds had been pledged by **UK Governments**.

So what happened next? Well, it appears that very little happened. In fact, talk of vaccine development virtually ceased. Outbreaks of SQPV, however, continued to affect regional populations in England, Scotland, and Wales. Animals developed symptoms and died, post mortem tests were undertaken, the virus was confirmed as the cause, and the whole sorry process would repeat.'

It would be interesting to know whether Welsh Government committed funds to this research in 2017 and if so, what and who they would have been funding; why no research occurred and what happened to committed funds.

I would be grateful if the Petitions Committee could ask the Minister to provide a full response to my petition.

Kind regards

Dr Craig Shuttleworth
Petitioner P-06-1332

<https://www.bangor.ac.uk/staff/natural-sciences/craig-shuttleworth-082156/en>