

HAVE YOUR SAY

The end of the lead debate?

Sir Barney White-Spunner, former chairman of the Countryside Alliance



On 12 July, just before she left office as Secretary of State at DEFRA, Elizabeth Truss wrote to John Swift, chairman of the Lead Ammunition Group (LAG). She thanked him for his report but said that it “did not show that the impacts of lead ammunition were significant enough to justify changing current policy”, and that she did not accept his “recommendation to ban its use”.

To me, who represented the shooting interest on the Lead Ammunition Group until I resigned last May — along with my colleagues Mark Tuffnell, John Batley and Steven Crouch — this response came as a relief but no great surprise. What made us resign was that some of the group were drawing conclusions that would lead to them recommending a ban from insufficient evidence. We should all be clear that any further restrictions on lead could be very damaging to a shooting industry. They must therefore be based on hard, peer-reviewed evidence tested over a prolonged period. Such evidence was just not there.

The LAG examined the effect of lead on three areas — livestock, wildlife and human health. There was agreement relatively early that there were no identifiable risks to livestock. The first paper on the effects on wildlife concluded that these were minimal but some of the group did not agree. They commissioned a second paper, which concluded that there were risks, though it failed to show sufficient evidence to convince a majority.

The most contentious area was human health. The problem was that the authors of the paper had no medical experience nor qualification and resisted suggestions, given that their concern was largely with the supposed effects of lead on children under seven, to include a paediatrician or a toxicologist on their team. The view of several of us on the Group was that this made their report less valuable.

Given that the Food Standards Agency has for some time published balanced guidance advising expectant mothers and those responsible for young children to avoid excessive quantities of game meat, the issue

came down to whether this guidance was adequate. The view of half the Group was that they were; our view was that there was no medical evidence to support this. The Food Standards Agency agreed with us.

As the LAG progressed, it became clear that some people saw it as more an exercise in emotion rather than of science. There was an erroneous view that lead would inevitably be banned because that was what the zeitgeist demanded and that the evidence had to fit this foregone conclusion; one member of the Group had actually written of their determination to have lead banned before the Group started work.

Ms Truss went on in her letter to John Swift to say that “this marks the end of the Group that the Government established in 2010”. So is this the end of the lead debate? One of the advantages of Brexit may be that we do not now have to take any further direction from the European Chemicals Agency, where the issue

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of lead remains under review. But we need to be careful. Much of our game is sold into Europe and if the EU does introduce further restrictions — though that this is not on the table at the moment — we may have to comply.

What the shooting community can do, which would greatly strengthen our position, is to adhere to the current rules, which ban the use of lead shot on waterfowl in England and Wales and over wetlands in Scotland and Northern Ireland. It isn't that much to ask and, if we pride ourselves on being a law-abiding community, we should abide by this law.

In the meantime, we should be thankful that we have a sensible and balanced response from a Secretary of State who stuck to her word and dealt with this long-running and controversial issue; she could so easily have left it in her successor's “in tray” so that all the arguments would have to be regurgitated for the umpteenth time.

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