

Epidemiological Investigation of Bovine Tuberculosis Infection Dynamics in Turkey

Abstract: A national epidemiological research project was carried out to define the dynamics affecting the epidemiology of Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) infection in Turkey and to identify the risk factors. Official Veterinarian (OV) and breeder original questionnaires were produced separately as part of this study to collect thorough data regarding the disease from the field. The number of questionnaires that needed to be filled out was decided by 95% confidence interval (CI) and 5% margin of error. The findings of 371 OV and 317 breeder questionnaires completed online across the country were analyzed. In addition, 28 outbreaks determined by random method were visited. To observe regional differences and field conditions, the opinions of OVs who monitored the disease and breeders were compiled. It was observed that the data obtained from both questionnaires was largely compatible. The main factors in the epidemiology of bTB infection were found to be effective fight, development of state policy, providing adequate financing, animal purchase, ear tagging and records, animal traders, animal markets, animal movements, conditional slaughtering, slaughterhouses, postmortem inspection, premise conditions, socio-economic impact, evaluation of raw milk, disease-free premises, compensation payments, and quarantine processes.

Keywords: Questionnaire, *Mycobacterium bovis*, Bovine Tuberculosis, Epidemiology, Field survey

1. Introduction

Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) caused by *Mycobacterium bovis* (*M. bovis*) is an infectious chronic disease that affects a wide range of hosts, including cattle and humans [1, 2]. This highly adaptive and successful pathogen spreads worldwide. bTB remains a significant

1 zoonotic infectious disease in cattle, other domestic and wild animals in many countries
2 [3]. Despite all the efforts and measures taken for eradication over the years, the disease
3 continues to pose a significant challenge in the global perspective. This zoonotic disease
4 continues to exist and poses a threat to both animals' and public health [4].

5 The concept of "One Health", which obscures the line between human and animal
6 medicine, has long been recognized as a useful strategy for the control of zoonotic
7 diseases [5]. bTB is a zoonotic disease of great concern and directly affects the cattle
8 industry [2]. The prevalence of bTB has a negative socio-economic impact on public
9 health, international trade, tourism, livestock, meat, and milk production [6]. bTB is a
10 major cause of the economic loss of livestock owners worldwide, with an estimated >50
11 million infected cattle and an annual cost of \$3 billion [7]. The socio-economic impact of
12 bTB on public health and agriculture in Turkey is estimated to be between \$15 and \$59
13 million annually [8]. According to the data of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
14 (MoAF) in 2001, when this number was given, while 59 bTB outbreaks were reported in
15 Turkey, this number increased to 2248¹ in 2019. As a result of tuberculin skin test (TST)
16 positivity, 23567 cattle were subjected to conditional slaughter. Approximately \$15
17 million in compensation was paid to the breeders in return. The public health risk and
18 socio-economic impact are thought to have increased a result of the rise in bTB disease
19 prevalence accordingly [9].

20 Separate questionnaires were prepared for the Official Veterinarians (OV) who
21 monitor the disease in the field and the breeders who have bTB in their premises, and
22 their responses were gathered in this study to determine the epidemiological reasons for

¹ World Organisation for Animal Health (2019). World Animal Health Information System, Annual Animal Health Report in 2019 [online]. Website http://www.oie.int/wahis_2/public/wahid.php/Countryinformation/reporting/reporthistory [accessed 29 August 2020].

1 Turkey's alarming increase in the number of bTB outbreaks in recent years. In addition,
2 to observe the regional differences and conditions in the field, premises with outbreaks
3 determined by random method were visited on-site. The reasons for the increase in
4 epidemiological terms were revealed with two-way confirmation by carrying out
5 interviews with the OVs who monitored the disease and breeders. The goal of this study
6 was to determine national field facts about the epidemiology of bTB disease in order to
7 develop disease control strategies.

8 **2. Materials and Methods**

9 **2.1. Preparation of Questionnaires**

10 The questionnaires were prepared based on the literature on the disease and experience in
11 the field. The approach developed by Ciaravino et al. (2017) was used to investigate the
12 perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of veterinarians and farmers who determined
13 the effectiveness of the Spanish bTB eradication program [10]. Two separate
14 questionnaires were prepared, one for OVs who monitor bTB disease in the field and the
15 other for the breeders who have bTB disease in their premises. It was made clear that the
16 responses of the participants would only be used for scientific purposes, and that
17 confidentiality would be maintained. The participants were not required to fill out the
18 form using their first and last names. Participation in the research was completely
19 voluntary. They might choose not to participate in the study, or withdraw if they did not
20 wish to answer questions. The real reasons for the prevalence of bTB disease in the field
21 were first-hand anonymously questioned through questionnaires. For this purpose, the
22 participants were asked fill in the blanks, multiple choice, sequential, closed, open-ended,
23 guided by the answer they gave to the previous question, and cross questions. The
24 validation of the questionnaires was provided by a preliminary field trial. The answers

1 given to the cross questions in both questionnaires were found to be significantly
2 correlated with the chi-square test statistic at the 0.05 significance level.

3 **2.2. Pre-Testing the Questionnaires**

4 After the questionnaires were prepared, they were shared with the researchers involved
5 in the national project we conducted, and required modifications were made based on
6 their feedback. The questionnaires were pre-tested by interviewing the breeder in a
7 premises with a bTB outbreak in the Kahramankazan district of Ankara and the OV that
8 monitored the disease in this premises. It was concluded that the questionnaires were
9 applicable in the field. They were then transferred to the electronic environment to reach
10 a wider target audience and to obtain data more easily. The link
11 '<https://docs.google.com/forms>' was shared and opened for online data entry by
12 Provincial/District Agriculture and Forestry Directorates (PDAFD).

13 **2.3. Selection of Participants**

14 The OVs in Turkey had a target population of 6543 people registered in the Veterinary
15 Information System (VETBIS) of the MoAF, working in the fight against animal diseases
16 in the 81 PDAFD. Based on this number, the number of OV to be included in the research
17 was determined by a two-stage random sampling method. The number of OVs working
18 in each province was examined in the first stage, and the number of active bTB outbreaks
19 in these provinces between 01.01.2017-06.03.2020 was considered in the second stage.
20 The minimum total number of included OVs in Turkey was calculated as 363 using a
21 95% Confidence Interval (CI) and a 5 percent margin of error (<http://www.winepi.net>).

22 The target population of the breeders was the cattle breeders in Turkey. The source
23 of the target population was VETBIS. The number of included breeders was determined
24 by a two-stage random sampling method in 66 provinces with 752 active bTB outbreaks

1 that occurred between 01.01.2017-06.03.2020. The selection criteria of the breeders to be
2 included were the districts where the bTB outbreaks were reported in the first stage and
3 the villages where the outbreaks occurred in these districts in the second stage
4 (<https://stattrek.com>). The minimum total number of breeders in Turkey was calculated
5 as 255, considering 95% CI and a 5% margin of error out of 752 outbreaks determined
6 between the mentioned dates (<http://www.winepi.net>).

7 **2.4. Selection of Sites for Epidemiological Field Survey**

8 A total of 28 settlements were determined for the epidemiological field survey with
9 fourteen provinces from seven regions of Turkey and two settlements (back-up) from
10 each province. The numbers and settlements were chosen at random by considering the
11 criteria like geographical region, bTB outbreak density in the province, accessibility, and
12 the project budget. VETBIS and Animal Registration System (TURKVET) of MoAF
13 were used to determine the premises with an outbreak to be visited in this settlement. In
14 the field research, opinions of OVs and breeders on the epidemiology of bTB disease
15 were taken and on-site observation was made.

16 **3. Results**

17 **3.1. The Number of Participants**

18 371 OVs from 72 provinces across Turkey and 317 breeders from a total of 61 provinces,
19 59 from designated provinces and 2 from other provinces answered the questionnaires. In
20 this context, the numbers included both in the OV and breeder questionnaire exceeded
21 the numbers calculated using 95% CI and 5% margin of error. The reason for this was
22 that the questionnaire access link remained available between the dates specified in the
23 official letter, and other premises with a bTB outbreak participated in the breeder

1 questionnaire in order to determine the epidemiological situation in the premises in the
2 same settlement. All of the questionnaire responses were taken into account.

3 **3.1.1. Findings of Official Veterinarian Questionnaire**

4 As shown in Figure 1, 84.4% of the OVs working in the field were young staff with less
5 than 15 years of experience.

6 **Figure 1.** Total employment duration of official veterinarians

7 As can be seen in Figure 2, on a provincial basis, there was at least one bTB
8 outbreak at a rate of 76.3% in the last six months. The presence of 72% of active bTB
9 outbreaks the field indicates that the spread of the disease continues.

10 **Figure 2.** The last time the bTB outbreak was reported

11 The long and costly quarantine period, trade restrictions of livestock and milk, and
12 restriction of pasture usage of positive premises were reported as the first three reasons
13 for breeders to avoid reporting disease.

14 OV pointed out the importance of slaughterhouses as a milestone in public health
15 and disease control, since postmortem inspection of cattle in slaughterhouses revealed
16 64.7% of bTB.

17 The purchased infected animal was the main transmission route of the disease on
18 premises. Undocumented animal movements, animal markets, and animal traders'
19 movements were reported by OVs as the leading mediating factors in spreading the
20 disease. It was understood that 66% of road controls made by law enforcement officers
21 to prevent undocumented animal movements were not properly carried out properly.

22 In premises with a bTB outbreak, the median value of the number of animals
23 conditionally slaughtered from the onset of the disease until its extinction was determined
24 as 35%. OVs declared that the time for animals to be sent to conditional slaughter was

1 approximately 16 days. It has been stated that the period of animals sent to be slaughtered
2 was extended due to the problems in price research and finding suitable slaughter places.
3 The compensation of the animals conditionally slaughtered due to bTB positivity was
4 paid to the breeders in three months at a rate of 64.4% according to questionnaire results.

5 OV's reported that bTB disease lesions were detected at a rate of 1-2% in
6 slaughterhouses and sacrificial slaughters. According to OV's, ear tagging and recording
7 of animals that have already been tagged with permanent and non-interventable tools to
8 trace the origin premises (up to six months) is important in terms of combating the
9 disease. It was indicated by OV that the change in the regulation called "ear tagging
10 amnesty", the deterioration of traceability for needs such as bank credit and income
11 statement was enough to nullify the fight against all epidemic diseases.

12 OV's stated that classifying livestock premises was required to improve the
13 conditions in terms of animal health and welfare. The increasing number of disease-free
14 zones, premises, and animals was reported to be important in terms of both healthy
15 breeder supply and healthy meat and milk production. OV's responded positively to a
16 vaccine that provides immunity around 70% at a rate of 89.2% (Figure 3).

17 **Figure 3.** Percentage of vaccine demand by official veterinarians

18 The vast majority of OV's stated that delivering blood serum to the laboratory for
19 the Interferon-gamma (IFN- γ) test within 8 hours would be challenging. However, this
20 test could be used in some special cases. A rate of 74.7% of OV's in Turkey thought that
21 wildlife had no affect on the transmission of bTB.

22 74.1% of OV's stated that they did not find the program implemented by MoAF in
23 the fight against bTB disease sufficient or partially sufficient. OV's emphasized the
24 importance of developing a national policy to combat the disease and of controlling

1 animal movements with the participation of all stakeholders, as shown in Figure 4, which
2 includes recommendations for control and eradication in the fight against bTB disease.

3 **Figure 4.** The recommendations of official veterinarians for the control and eradication
4 of bTB disease

5 **3.1.2. Findings of Breeder Questionnaire**

6 As shown in Figure 5, 51.7% of the breeders in Turkey were primary school graduates,
7 followed by high school and secondary school graduates.

8 **Figure 5.** Education status of the breeders

9 77% of the premises made mixed production, followed by milk, fattening, and
10 breeder type production, respectively. It was determined that these premises were
11 generally close to each other, 51.7% of them were semi-open, 42.9% of them were closed,
12 and the median value of the number of animals per premise was 22 heads.

13 It was reported by the breeders that bTB disease was detected at a rate of 90.5%
14 in the slaughterhouse or after sacrificial slaughter. 85.5% of the premises did not have
15 bTB disease before. In premises with bTB outbreaks, the median percent value of the
16 number of animals sent to conditional slaughter and died in the period from the onset of
17 the disease to its extinction was calculated as 39%. The price range and proportional
18 distribution of the economic loss of the premises where the bTB disease originated is
19 shown in Figure 6.

20 **Figure 6.** Proportional distribution of the loss caused by the bTB disease to the economy
21 of the premises (1\$ is approximately 8.5 Turkish Lira)

22 Raw milk collected from bTB negative animals in quarantine was mostly heat-
23 treated and used.

1 According to breeders, 94.6% of the bTB positive animals were conditionally
2 slaughtered within one month (approximately 17 days on average) and 68.1% received
3 compensation within three months. While there was no change in the decision of 76% of
4 the breeders if the compensations were not provided on time, it was discovered that the
5 decision of 24% of the breeders was affected by this situation.

6 The breeders stated that 38.2% of the neighboring premises did not report any
7 suspected cases of bTB. The first three reasons for this situation are the long time taken
8 for quarantine and bureaucratic procedures in the fight against the disease, not selling
9 animals and milk, and not receiving compensation on time. As shown in Figure 7, at least
10 45.1% of the breeders reported bTB disease in another premises in the same location.

11 **Figure 7.** bTB disease status in other premises in the same location

12 As depicted in Figure 8, there was a 64.7% rate of animal entry to the premises in
13 a calendar year. The rates of animal introduction to the premises before the disease
14 outbreak were also found to be similar.

15 **Figure 8.** The frequency of animal introduction to the premise

16 It was understood that the detection of bTB disease lesions in sacrificial slaughters
17 was between 1-2%. 97.2% of the breeders stated that they would like to prefer to use the
18 bTB vaccine that could be developed. According to the breeders, the wild animals on the
19 pasture did not have a major effect on the transmission of the bTB disease.

20 According to the breeders, the fight of MoAF against bTB disease was sufficient
21 and partially sufficient at a rate of 86.7%. The suspected cases not reported on time, the
22 ineffectiveness of the implemented control program, and the inability of the tests to fully
23 detect sick animals are among the first three reasons for the inadequacy of MoAF in the
24 fight against bTB disease. As shown in Figure 9, the first three measurements to be taken

1 in the fight against bTB disease were determined as the implementation of a long-term
2 and effective program as a state policy with the participation of all stakeholders, the
3 development of tests, and the prevention of undocumented animal trading.

4 **Figure 9.** Necessary measures to be taken by breeders in the fight against bTB disease

5 **3.2. Findings of the Field Survey**

6 Despite the risk of Covid-19 disease, premises owners with outbreaks and OV's that
7 monitor the disease in these premises were visited for the epidemiological field survey in
8 fourteen provinces across seven regions of Turkey, in a total of 28 settlements, 26 of
9 which were randomly determined and two substitutes. Information on the epidemiology
10 of bTB infection was compiled during these interviews and on-site observation.

11 **3.2.1. Findings of Official Veterinarian Field Survey**

12 According to OV's, postmortem inspection of cattle carcasses in the slaughterhouse
13 resulted in the detection of bTB disease in more than 90% of cases. It was stated that
14 infected animal purchases and the movements of the traders were the first two places
15 where the disease was introduced, and animal movements and animal markets were the
16 main factors in the spread of the disease.

17 It was reported that the animal stock in premises with bTB disease was generally
18 out of date. Furthermore, the changes in the regulation known as "ear tagging amnesty"
19 pose a problem. The ear tags of the animals should be permanent and their records should
20 be traceable.

21 It was stated that the conditional slaughter should be done by the Meat and Milk
22 Institution (MMI) instead of private slaughterhouses. It was reported that bTB positive
23 animals were slaughtered in about 16 days. Furthermore, it was stated that an average of
24 45% of the animals in the premises were slaughtered between the emergence of the

1 disease and its extinction. It was also reported that compensation was paid to the breeders
2 in an average of 67 days. The critical role of paying compensation on time and regularly
3 was also reported.

4 According to the report, bTB disease lesions were detected in approximately 1%
5 of animals slaughtered in slaughterhouses after postmortem inspection and 0.33% of
6 sacrificial slaughters. However, bTB positivity rate was estimated to be higher in cases
7 where general TST screening was performed.

8 While bTB disease is generally more common in dairy farms and in elderly cows,
9 it has been declared that it is less common in fattening farms and that the conditions of
10 livestock premises should be improved by classifying them. Due to time constraints, the
11 IFN- γ test was reported to be challenging to use in the field.

12 It was stated that studies on progressive disease-free areas can be implemented
13 regionally, that premises had problems in finding disease-free breeding animals.
14 Furthermore, it has been reported that tested or disease-free breeding animals should be
15 distributed through social projects.

16 OV emphasized that the disease fight should be carried out as a single practice
17 throughout the country, with the spirit of mobilization as a state policy and in coordination
18 with all relevant institutions. Furthermore, OV stated that it is necessary to focus on
19 creating teams that are fully equipped and free from unnecessary workload to intervene
20 in diseases in the field. In addition, it was stated that there was an intense demand for the
21 development of a vaccine against bTB.

22 **3.2.2. Findings of Breeder Field Survey**

23 The breeders declared that the detection of bTB disease was determined by postmortem
24 inspection in the slaughterhouse at a rate of 90%. It was reported that the possible

1 transmission route of the disease to the premises was the newly purchased infected
2 animals, followed by uncontrolled movement of traders.

3 It was stated that undocumented animal movements were made for various
4 reasons. It was declared that some breeders avoid reporting for various reasons, such as
5 cuts in payments, long quarantine periods, and unawareness. It was reported that the
6 disease persists for a long time in the form of foci in some settlements. It was declared
7 and observed on site that generally the conditions of livestock were not good in terms of
8 physical, health, and welfare, and the premises were close to each other.

9 It was stated that there were problems with the slaughtering, transportation, and
10 payments of the bTB positive animals in the MMI slaughterhouses. These animals were
11 sent to slaughter in about 15 days, the compensation was paid in an average of 92 days,
12 and an average of 55% of the animals on the premises were sent to slaughter from the
13 onset of the disease until its extinction.

14 bTB disease lesions were found in approximately 2% of sacrificial slaughters. The
15 loss due to bTB disease was estimated to be around 105000 TL per premises, and it was
16 reported that milk sales in dairy farms decreased by approximately 90%, and the loss in
17 some premises affected the family's livelihood.

18 Breeders suggested that studies be conducted for progressive disease-free areas,
19 that breeding animals be purchased from disease-free premises, and that TST be
20 implemented on dairy-breeding farms.

21 The breeders also stated that they were generally satisfied with MoAF's efforts to
22 combat the disease. However, they also mentioned the need for training of breeders. They
23 also stated that raw milk is generally given to companies that apply heat treatment.
24 Furthermore, according to breeders, the younger generation does not want to breed

1 livestock. They also stated that there was a high demand for vaccine development, and
2 there was no suspected case of bTB from wildlife.

3 **Table** shows the common values reported as a result of the questionnaires and
4 field survey for comparison.

5 **Table.** Comparison of questionnaires and epidemiological field survey values.

6 **4. Discussion**

7 Despite the fact that several studies on bTB disease have been carried out in Turkey to
8 date, no research on the epidemiology of the disease at the national level has been found
9 in the literature review. The last survey was conducted in 2857 herds in 2011 as part of
10 the European Union project "Eradication of Brucellosis and Tuberculosis in Turkey," in
11 which the Dutch government was a partner. The individual prevalence was 1.4% (95%
12 CI) and the herd prevalence was approximately 2.5% (95% CI) with the comparative
13 intradermal tuberculin skin test (CITT) [11]. According to the World Organization for
14 Animal Health (OIE) Turkey reports, while the number of bTB outbreaks was 348² in
15 2011, this number was reported as 2248³ in 2019.

16 In this context, this research was compiled for the first time in Turkey at the
17 national level, by using the epidemiological data reports of the disease obtained from the
18 systems, the prepared OV and breeder questionnaires, and the opinions of the OVs and
19 breeders by visiting the premises with outbreaks. This research was planned with broad
20 participation on a national scale. In this study, the opinions of the OVs and breeder

² World Organisation for Animal Health (2011). World Animal Health Information System, Annual Animal Health Report in 2011 [online]. Website http://www.oie.int/wahis_2/public/wahid.php/Countryinformation/reporting/reporthistory [accessed 24 April 2020].

³ World Organisation for Animal Health (2019). World Animal Health Information System, Annual Animal Health Report in 2019 [online]. Website http://www.oie.int/wahis_2/public/wahid.php/Countryinformation/reporting/reporthistory [accessed 29 August 2020].

1 questionnaires, and the findings of the field survey were compared, and the results were
2 found to be largely compatible with each other.

3 When the obtained data was evaluated, it has been understood that the main factor
4 in the introduction of bTB disease to the herd was the purchase of infected animals. The
5 movements of traders and animal markets were shown to be important in the spread of
6 the disease and outbreaks were active in the field.

7 Since approximately 90% of the disease was detected after postmortem inspection
8 in the slaughterhouse, it has been understood that postmortem inspection surveillance of
9 the slaughterhouse is the cornerstone of the fight against the disease. In premises with
10 bTB disease, the time to be sent to conditional slaughter was approximately two weeks,
11 and the time to pay compensation to the breeder was approximately three months. It was
12 declared that the rate of being sent to the conditional slaughter from premises with
13 outbreaks was in the range of 35-55% from the onset of the disease to its extinction.

14 It was declared and observed that the loss caused by the bTB disease and the
15 decrease in milk sales, especially on dairy farms, even affected the livelihood of the
16 family. The rate of bTB positivity in general TST screening was expected to be greater
17 than the rate of bTB lesions detected in slaughterhouses and sacrificial slaughters, which
18 was estimated to be 1-2%.

19 It was stated that by classifying the livestock premises, it was necessary to
20 improve the ones whose conditions were not suitable in terms of animal health and
21 welfare. The implementation of disease-free studies was important for the supply of
22 healthy breeders. It was observed that there was intense demand for the development of
23 vaccines to fight against the disease.

1 Controlling animal movements with the participation of all stakeholders,
2 developing a state policy and effectively combating bTB disease by providing adequate
3 and sustainable financial support were expressed as the common opinions by the
4 participants.

5 The goal in animal production should not be intensive production, but healthy
6 production in which the issue of animal health is focused.

7 **Acknowledgements:**

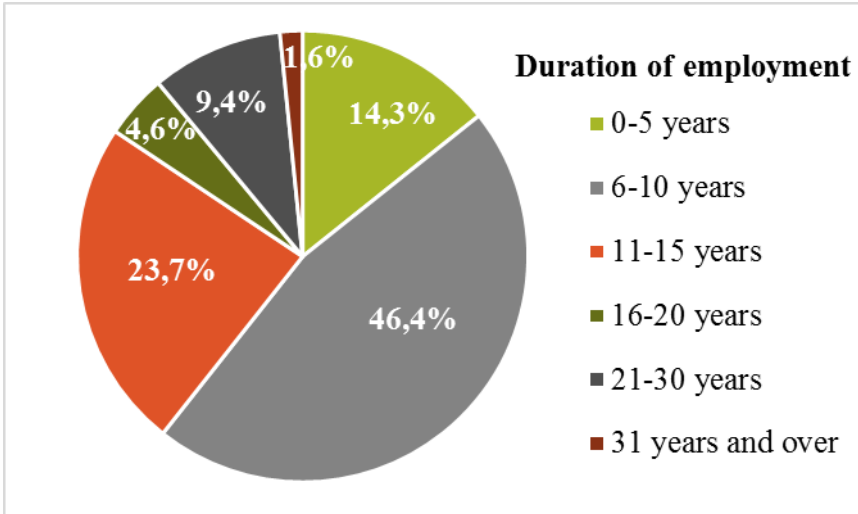
8 The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's General Directorate of Agricultural Research
9 and Policies funded this research as a national project with the number
10 TAGEM/HSGYAD/Ü/20/A5/P1/1643, and it was accepted as a PhD dissertation by the
11 Institute of Health Sciences at Kırıkkale University. The authors thank Dr. Michael
12 Tildesley and Dr. İlkem Demirkesen Mert for proofreading of this manuscript.

13 **Conflict of interest:** The authors do not declare a conflict of interest.

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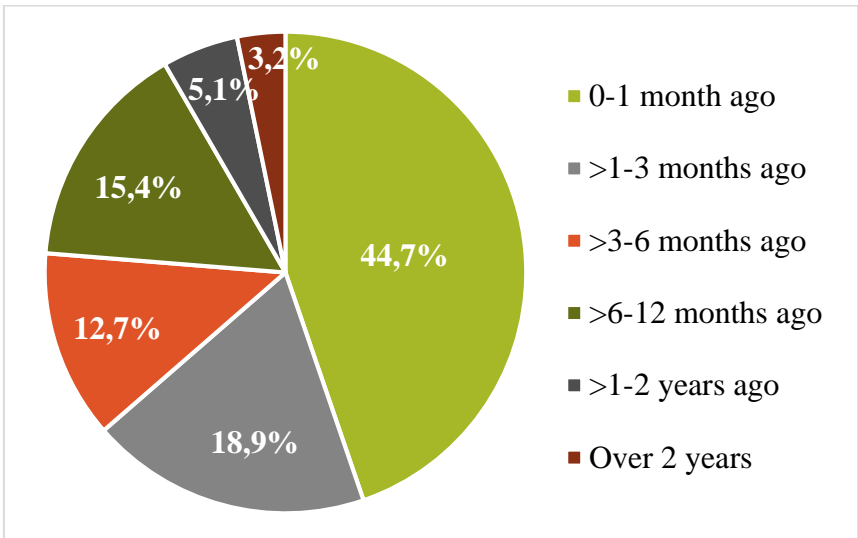
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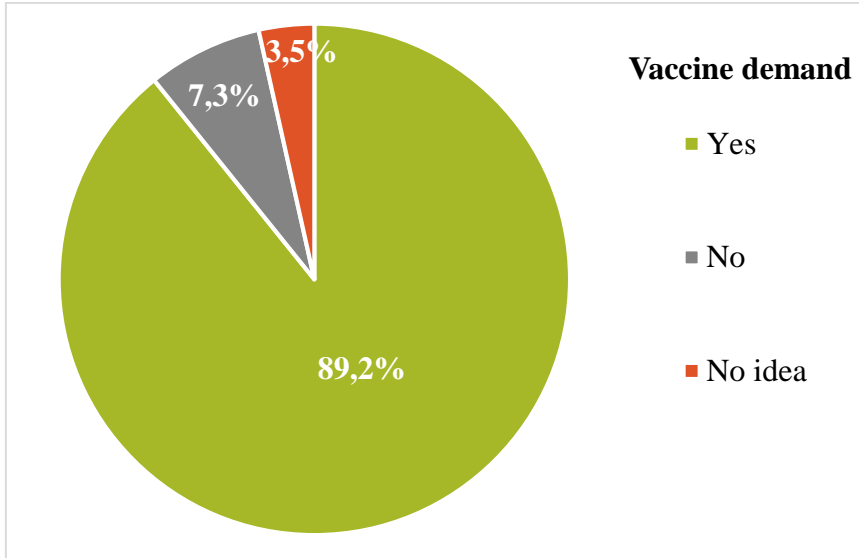
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2 **Figure 1.** Total employment duration of official veterinarians



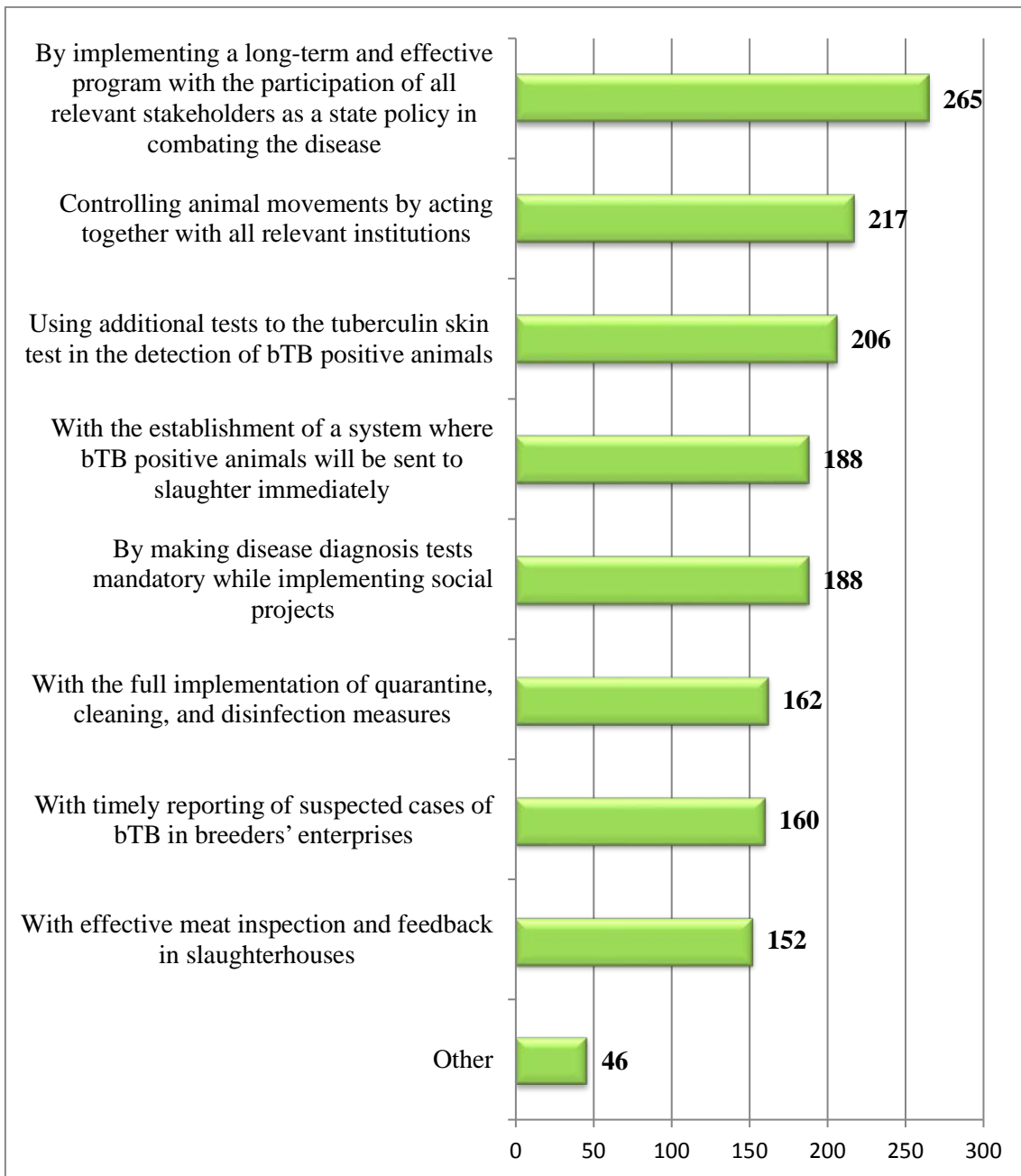
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4 **Figure 2.** The last time the bTB outbreak was reported



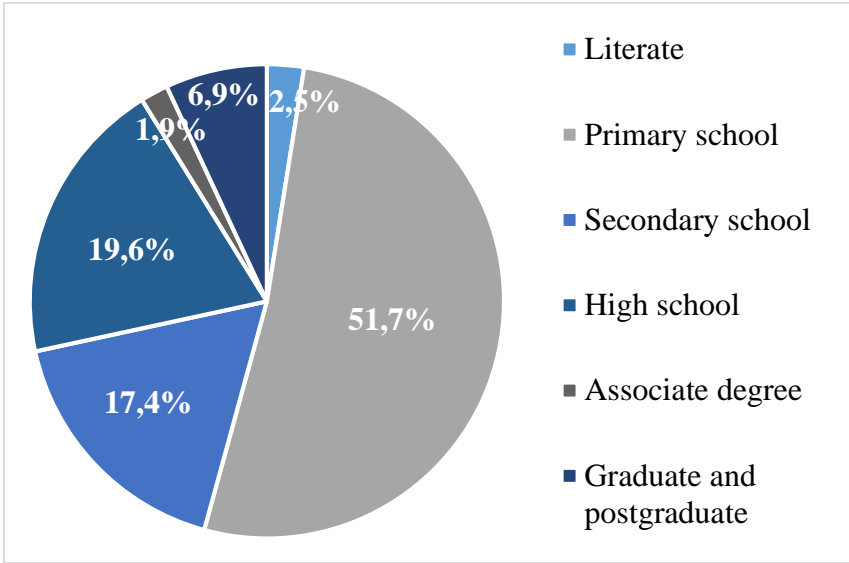
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2 **Figure 3.** The percentage of vaccine demand by official veterinarians



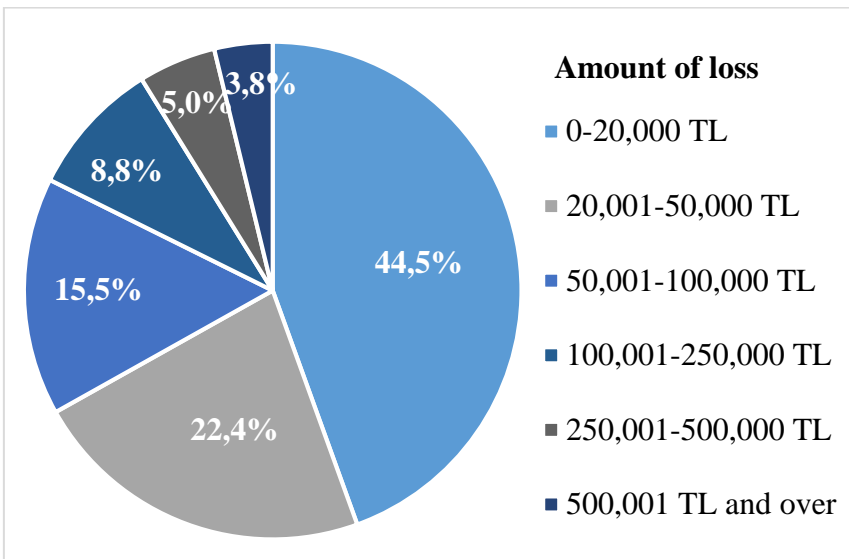
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2 **Figure 4.** The recommendations of official veterinarians for the control and eradication
 3 of bTB disease



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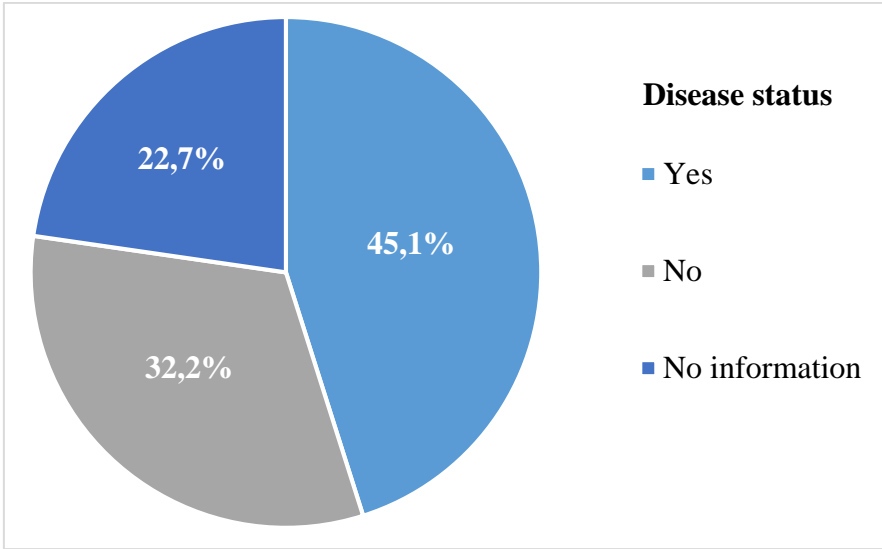
2 **Figure 5.** Education status of the breeders



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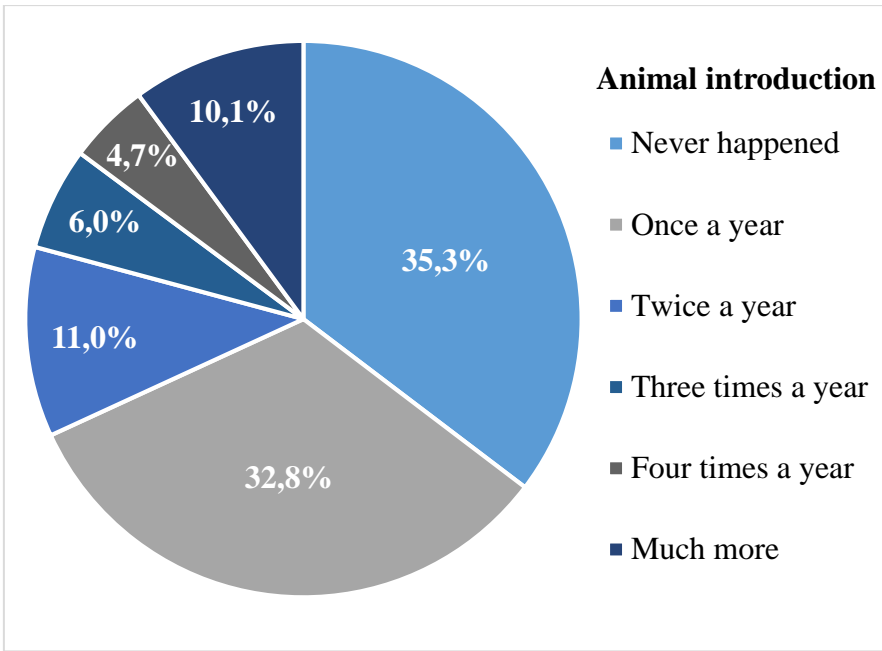
4 **Figure 6.** Proportional distribution of economic loss of the premise caused by the bTB

5 disease (1\$ is approximately 8.5 Turkish Lira)



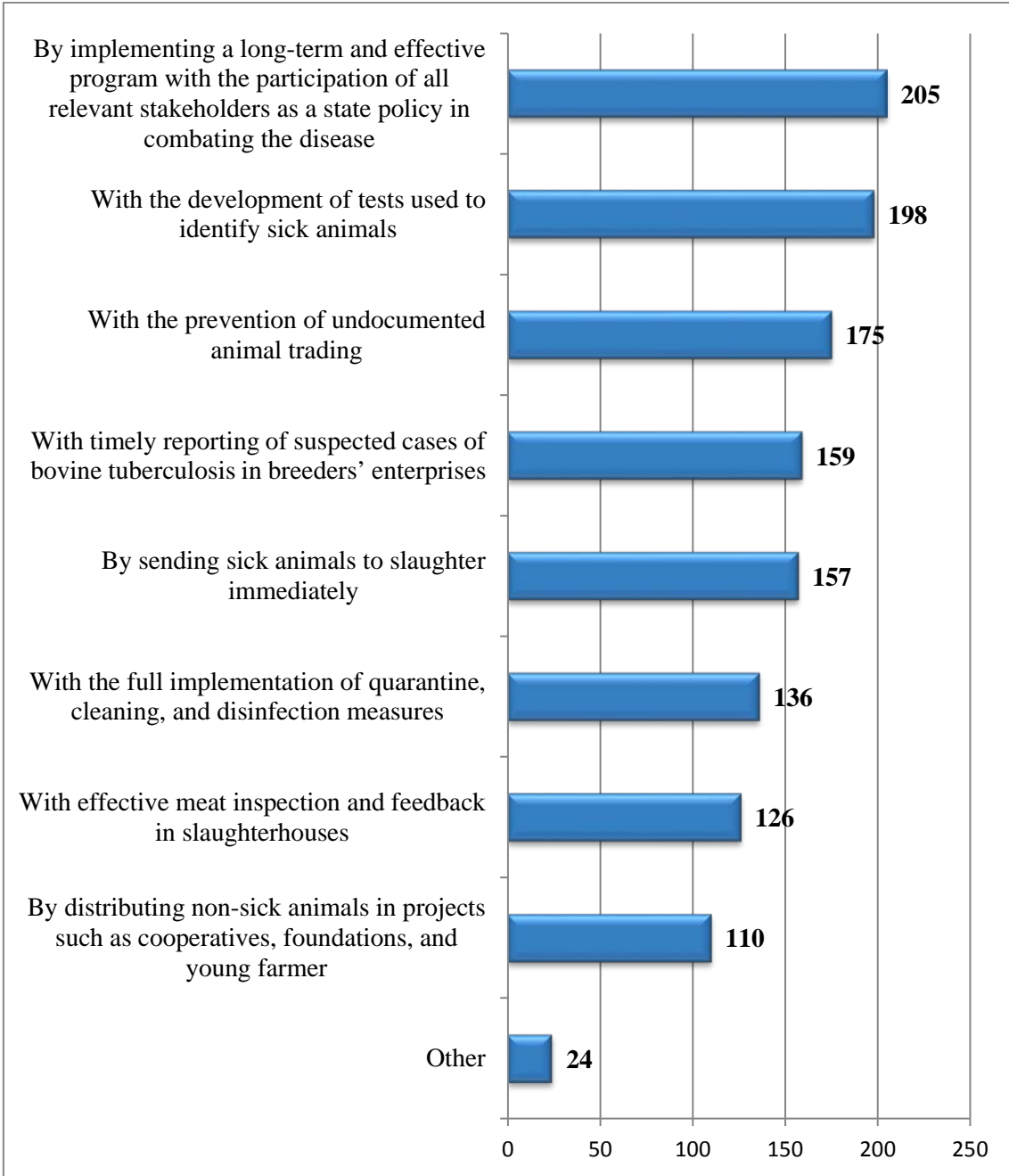
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2 **Figure 7.** bTB disease in other premises in the same location



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4 **Figure 8.** The frequency of animal introduction to the premise



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Figure 9. Necessary measures to be taken by breeders in the fight against bTB disease

1 **Table.** Comparison of questionnaires and epidemiological field survey values

Topics	Questionnaire		Field survey	
	OV	Breeder	OV	Breeder
<i>Detection of bTB disease (Slaughterhouse-sacrificial slaughter)</i>	64.7%	90.5%	> 90%	90%
<i>Time to send to the conditional slaughter (Approximately days)</i>	16	17	16	15
<i>Time to pay compensation to breeder (Days)</i>	90	90	67	92
<i>Median percent of animals sent to slaughter</i>	35	39	45	55
<i>The incidence of bTB lesions in slaughterhouses</i>	1-2%	-	Approx. 1%	-
<i>The incidence of bTB lesions in sacrificial slaughter</i>	1-2%	1-2%	Approx. 0.33%	Approx. 2%

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