



"It's a mess, a bloody mess," was farmer Carol Wainwright's blunt assessment. "The government's messed the whole thing up. It's disgusting. They've put us through all this, promised they're going to sort out the problem and then at the last minute they give up."

For once, people on both sides of the debate agreed. Whether they were for the badger cull or opposed to it, they tended to agree the policy had been badly botched. "I can't believe that at the very last moment they've said it's not going ahead," said Wainwright, who farms in the planned cull area in Gloucestershire. "It's a disgrace."

Steve Jones, a farm manager in the Forest of Dean and a vocal critic of culling, said he had thought the shooting would at least begin. "I thought it would be derailed. But I thought the train would at least get out of the station," he said. "This just goes to show how flawed the cull was. Public opinion is against it, science is against it, common sense is against it."

Jones feels hugely sorry for the farmers who are having to cope with bovine TB but believes they need to do more – and be helped to do more – to improve animal husbandry and biosecurity on their farms. "Dairy farmers have a really big problem. The price of milk is so low that these farms are becoming more and more impoverished. They can't afford to look after the animals in the way they need to be looked after," he said.

Roger Yeates, a Forest of Dean farmer and Conservative councillor, said the planned cull had been badly handled. "I didn't think shooting badgers was the way to go – that would mean killing the healthy ones that were running about; the infected ones tend to stay underground. I'm pleased it's off."

The Forest of Dean district council had voted to ban badger culling on its land and was calling on all landowners within its boundary to do the same.

Jackie Fraser, the Labour councillor who proposed the motion to ban culling, gave a tentative welcome to the government's move "I'm pleased but cautious. I hope the government is going to look seriously at other ways of tackling bovine TB, like vaccinating cattle and improving biosecurity."

The campaign group Gloucestershire Against Badger Shooting expressed delight. Liz Gaffer, a spokeswoman, admitted she had tears in her eyes when she heard. "We are so, so pleased to hear this news. We hope the government will not just delay but will decide not to pursue a cull as the evidence is clear that culling badgers is not the most effective, efficient or humane way of reducing bovine TB.

"People in Gloucestershire have voiced their concern over the rationale behind it and the safety issues involved. We believe the government may have taken this on board and we will continue to campaign for a vaccination programme of cattle and badgers that we believe will really support farmers who are faced with this awful disease."

For now, the saboteurs, who had been ready to get out into the cull zones wearing in high-visibility jackets and carrying horns and rape alarms, can stand down.

Over the last few months experienced saboteurs have been joined by many newcomers to the animal rights scene, keen to map setts and disrupt the cull.

Kayleigh, an activist who took the Guardian out on a sett-mapping expedition, spent the morning handing out leaflets outside a supermarket in Bristol to flag up the fact that it stocked milk from places where badgers were going to be culled.

The plan was for a few drinks later to celebrate. "It's fantastic news; it takes the pressure off us a bit and we can have a bit of a break but we'll continue to survey setts and continue to prepare. We'll also be making sure farmers don't start taking the law into their own hands."

Jay Tiernan, a leader in the Stop the Cull organisation, which champions direct action, said he would carry on fighting the cull until the government announced that it had been dropped permanently. "There are a lot of new people who have come to the movement in the last few months. They won't be going anywhere and will be ready to get out there if needed."