Kenyan cows produce 1/10th as much milk as those in Britain — If adopted, gene editing could dramatically improve quality and safety of African livestock

East Coast Fever (ECF) is rampant [in African countries]. ECF, which is caused by protozoan parasites spread by ticks, kills around 1m cattle a year. It also prevents the introduction of faster-growing, higher-yielding European breeds, which are much more susceptible to the illness than their African kin.

Though a vaccine is available, and the ticks can be attacked with sprayed pesticides (see picture), both of these approaches are costly. Most farmers thus continue to use less-productive local varieties—curtailing their incomes and reducing agricultural output. The difference is stark: a Kenyan cow produces around a tenth as much milk as one in Britain.

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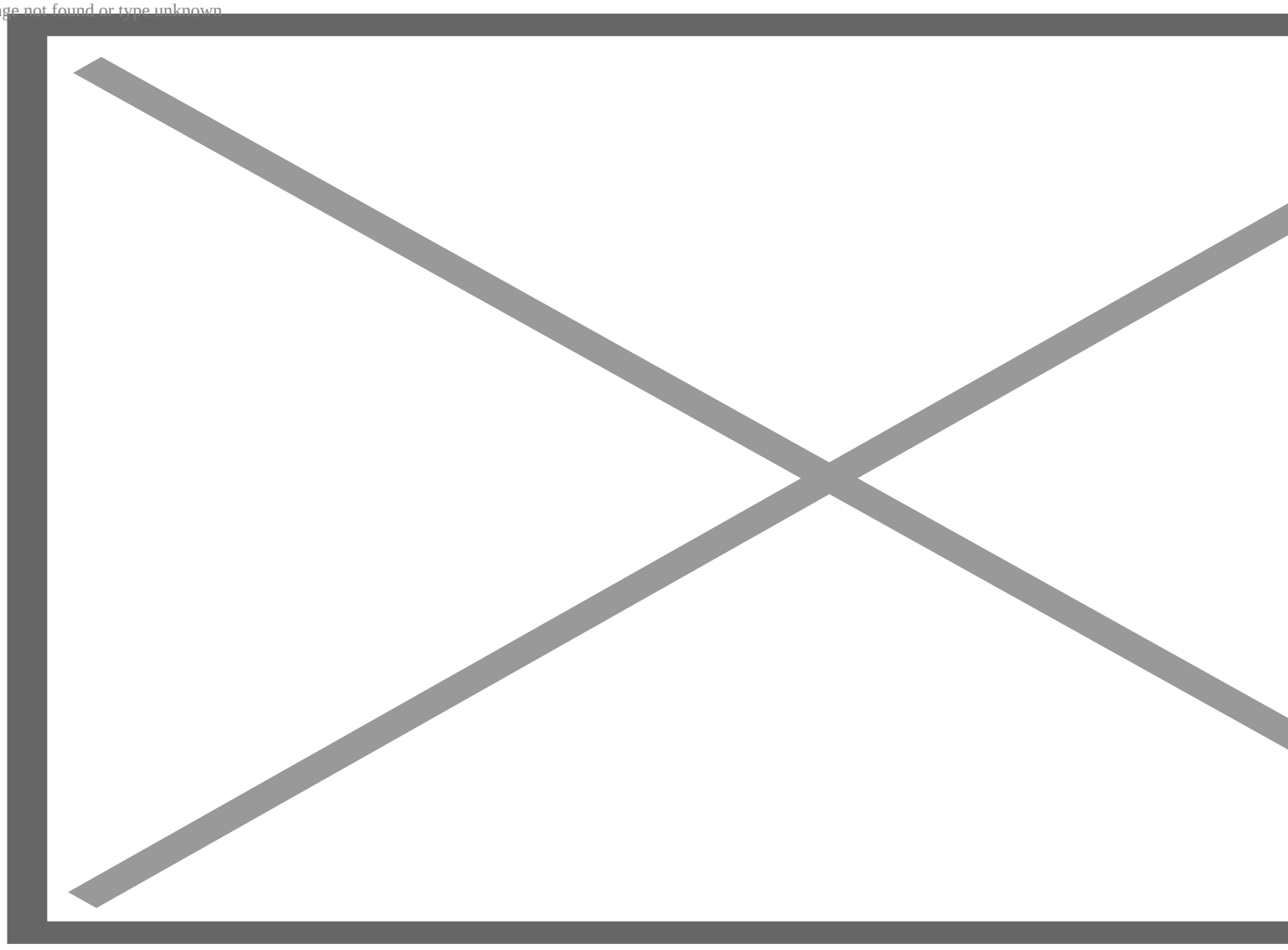

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By reducing mortality and increasing productivity, gene-edited European livestock could have a useful effect in Africa—though some worry the benefits are overstated. Dr Prendergast points to the many other animal diseases prevalent on the continent, to which such cattle would still be susceptible. He suggests farmers might be better off breeding local varieties for resistance (and also higher productivity).

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