

Biosecurity in South Africa: A perfect storm?

 By [John Hudson](#)

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Commercial agriculture, while essential for ensuring food security for a burgeoning population, poses many challenges. One of these is an increased risk of disease outbreaks due to livestock farming on an intensive scale, where animals live in closer proximity than would naturally occur. However, few countries have had to manage disease outbreaks to the extent that South Africa has had to do in recent years.



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The consensus among various experts, including veterinary specialists, industry organisations and a government-appointed task team, is that the almost simultaneous disease outbreaks are driven by various factors. These include a lack of knowledge about how diseases are transmitted and how to recognise the symptoms of disease; irresponsible or illegal movement of animals in violation of regulations; and a lack of state oversight, vaccinations, and proper awareness.

The findings of the government-appointed task team published earlier this year also highlight major concerns regarding the management of and response to outbreaks of animal disease, which ultimately boils down to a lack of capacity required to reinforce control measures and little to no government funding.

What are the challenges?

The protocol for controlled diseases like foot and mouth disease (FMD) and avian influenza is to place all affected farms under strict quarantine, put all surviving animals down, and dispose of the carcasses as quickly as possible to restrict the disease from spreading.

Unfortunately, the system has major weaknesses. The biggest challenge is that state veterinary services don't have sufficient resources to manage the outbreaks effectively. Another issue is that, because the state doesn't compensate farmers for their losses, farmers are reluctant to comply with orders to cull, resulting in outbreaks spreading beyond the farm gate.

Vaccines are also a challenge, and after production lines broke down at state-run Onderstepoort Biological Products, the industry experienced a severe shortage of FMD vaccines earlier this year. Surprisingly, avian influenza vaccines aren't available in South Africa yet, but according to the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, government talks to finalise access are at an advanced stage and the registration of these medicines is being fast-tracked.

According to sources in the veterinary industry, there is no reason why private companies or institutions should not be allowed to produce critical vaccines, as the legislative framework for registering vaccines is already in place, which means that safety and efficacy will be monitored.

The impact is severe

Unfortunately, this situation threatens the livelihoods of both commercial and small-scale farmers, as well as the 500,000 people employed in the livestock industry, while the disruption of local, national, and international markets is another major consideration.

The beef industry accounts for a sizable share of the South African agricultural economy. Beef exports accounted for about 1% of agricultural exports in 2022 but were down 12% year-on-year according to data from Trade Map, primarily due to the temporary closures of various export markets following the FMD outbreak.

The sheep industry was also affected. The data also showed that China, a significant market for South African wool, suspended imports in 2022, resulting in a 21% year-on-year decline in the export value of wool that year. The pig industry was also affected by FMD, which led to Namibia – South Africa's largest pork export market prior to August 2022 – closing its borders to South African pork products.

Until now, FMD has not occurred in any pigs, but fears that the disease could be transmitted to pigs destined for export prompted Namibia, which has an export market to the European Union, to impose its current ban on South African pork.

South Africa's FMD-free status, which the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) removed in 2019, has not been reinstated. Experts believe that to claw back to where we were will take between three to five years and will require zero cases being reported, proper surveillance and visits by WOAH to ensure that the necessary controls and management are in place.

On top of the FMD woes, towards the end of last year, the pig industry was put under more pressure when outbreaks of African swine fever – a disease that remains a challenge – were reported.

More recently, poultry livestock farmers have had to deal with avian influenza. According to the Associated Press, about a quarter of South Africa's chickens died or were culled, and breeders of layers and broilers suffered major losses of around \$25m (R460m) so far.

But, aside from the billions each disease outbreak costs the country, trust becomes an issue. As soon as producers manage to rebuild trust in export markets, that trust is broken again when export bans are reinstated following the next outbreak. Ultimately, if you cannot supply the export market on a continual basis, they will no longer readily buy from you and will move on to more reliable suppliers elsewhere.

What needs to change?

Opinion seems to be unanimous about what is required to rectify the untenable position in which South African agriculture finds itself. Both government and industry role players need to accept accountability for biosecurity and develop a collaborative approach to address the many issues discussed in this article.

The sad reality is that there is a pervasive mistrust and miscommunication between the private sector and state organisations. New and innovative thinking and putting our differences aside are needed to deal with the reality on the ground.

Traceability is a vital factor for managing livestock movements, but it will not be the answer without solving the other challenges. Furthermore, a national identification and traceability system in the livestock sector could cost roughly R200 million and take up to 10 years to finalise.

The lack of a reliable national disease control system leaves assurance of food safety, agricultural financing and trust between consumers and farmers hanging in the balance, with farmers bearing the brunt of the resulting financial strain. The South African agricultural sector faces many urgent challenges, but biosecurity must be recognised as one of the most pressing – the country's food security and export potential depends on it.

ABOUT JOHN HUDSON

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