MINISTER
AGRICULTURE
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Private Bag X250, Pretoria, 0001; 20 Steve Biko Street, Pretoria, 0001
Tel.: 012 319 6000; Email: queries@nda.gov.za; Web: www.nda.gov.za

MEDIA STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE **23 January 2026**

Minister Steenhuisen announces dispatch of Foot and Mouth Disease virus strains to Pirbright Institute

The Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen, has officially announced that South Africa has resumed the submission of Foot and mouth disease (FMD) field strains to the Pirbright Institute in the United Kingdom. This marks the first time since 2011 that the country has sent FMD field strains to this global authority.

The Pirbright Institute serves as the World Reference Laboratory for FMD.

While Pirbright does not manufacture vaccines, its role is critical: it tests whether current vaccines around the world actually “match” the specific virus strains circulating in the field.

It is important to note that over the last year, the Department of Agriculture sent several other materials to the Pirbright laboratory as part of the routine material sharing by the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) reference labs, with the most recent being in the last quarter of 2025. The reason WOAH reference laboratories share circulating strains of pathogens is to update each other’s catalogues for reference purposes.

By sending our latest FMD virus strains to Pirbright, South Africa is ensuring that the millions of vaccine doses being procured are scientifically proven to protect our national herd, Minister Steenhuisen said.

Minister Steenhuisen also wants to caution farmers and agriculture stakeholders against fake news doing the rounds that the FMD strains were sent to the wrong laboratory division of Pirbright. “The virus strains were sent to the correct laboratory”.

On the waybill, it states it is sent to the ‘Non-Vesicular Disease Reference Laboratory’. The department has previously sent all its materials to this branch, as it is the administrative receiving point.

Pirbright does not assess correctness based on the waybill but looks at the declared pathogen, biosafety category, submission documentation, and temperature/chain-of-custody records. On arrival, material is triaged and routed internally to the correct reference laboratory. If there were any concerns about misrouting, Pirbright would immediately flag it.

Strategy for FMD Freedom

Sending the FMD virus strains to Pirbright is an important part of the Department of Agriculture’s new 10-Year FMD Eradication Strategy, which aims to transition South Africa to “FMD-Free Status with Vaccination”. The strategy moves away from temporary crisis management toward a permanent, technical solution.

The immediate phases of the strategy include:

Phase 1: Stabilisation (Years 1–2): Intensive mass vaccination in high-risk hotspots in provinces. The goal is to reduce outbreak incidents by 70% within the first year. targeted Vaccination: We are prioritising high-risk zones, with the goal of reaching at least 80% coverage in targeted cattle populations, especially in the communal areas and up to 100% in feedlots and dairy cows. The objective is to reduce outbreak incidence within 12 months by more than 70% in the high-risk provinces through systematic vaccination and preserve FMD-free provinces through buffer vaccination and strict movement controls.

High-quality vaccines with high potency will be used during the campaign. We have three suppliers, Biogénesis Bagó in Argentina, Dollvet vaccine from Turkey, and BVI from Botswana.

“On Thursday, I met with the Argentine Ambassador, H.E. Raúl Ailán, to align on our national strategy to achieve FMD disease-free status with vaccination. The management team from Biogénesis Bagó accompanied the ambassador and assured me they are able and ready to supply us with their high-quality vaccine as

soon as their import permits are finalised by the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA). Argentina's success in this field is a blueprint for our own roadmap, and I welcome the learnings from people who have walked the path before," the minister said.

Biogénesis will also be able to supply one million doses by mid-February and an additional five million doses by mid-March 2026. Locally, we are activating a production line through the ARC and OBP, which will initially produce 20 000 doses per week, scaling up to a capacity of 960 000 doses.

The ARC is bringing its production forward and will be able to supply 12 000 doses to our vaccine pool by mid-February.

The department is expecting to receive 1,5 million doses of vaccine from Dollvet in mid-February – the s21 permit from SAHPRA has been received, and we have issued the s20 permit for experimental/research import of the vaccine.

The BVI will supply 700 000 doses of vaccine by 1st of March 2026.

Phase 2: Consolidation (Years 2–4): Establishing secure buffer zones and certified "compartments" to protect disease-free provinces like the Western and Northern Cape, allowing for the resumption of safe international trade.

Phase 3 & 4: Recovery (Years 4–10): Gradual withdrawal of vaccination in specific zones and applying for formal recognition of FMD-free status from the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH)

END

For media enquiries, please contact:

Ms Joylene van Wyk

Ministry of Agriculture Spokesperson

joylenev@nda.gov.za / 063 298 5661

Issued by: The Ministry of Agriculture