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MEDIA STATEMENT

10 JUNE 2025

BIOSECURITY SUMMIT 2025

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

"A Whole-of-Society Approach to Biosecurity in South Africa"

Good morning, everyone.

It is a distinct honour to join you here at the University of Pretoria for the 2025 Biosecurity Summit, among farmers, scientists, policymakers, and partners from across our country, all united by a shared mission: To protect South Africa's agricultural future through stronger, smarter biosecurity.

Allow me first to thank the organisers and acknowledge the leadership shown by the University of Pretoria and the Biosecurity Hub at Innovation Africa. This partnership—between the university, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Science and Innovation—has already become a living example of what we can achieve when research, policy, and practice come together.

Our presence here today speaks to a broader truth: Biosecurity is no longer a peripheral issue. It is a national imperative. It sits at the intersection of food security, trade, rural development, public health, and national resilience. As such, it must be treated with the urgency, coherence, and seriousness it deserves.

The past few years have made our vulnerabilities painfully clear. The 2023 avian influenza outbreak was not just a veterinary issue, it triggered widespread food price shocks, supply shortages, and devastating losses for producers. Similarly, the ongoing outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) have resulted in bans on

livestock movement, halted exports, and widespread economic distress, particularly in rural provinces.

We have also faced listeriosis, swine flu, pepper ringspot virus, Goss's wilt, and other threats. Each has disrupted our supply chains, shaken consumer confidence, and weakened our position in international markets.

These are not isolated agricultural challenges; they are systemic risks. They undermine livelihoods, dent the gross domestic product (GDP), and strain the social contract—and they demand a proactive, rather than reactive, response.

Let me be frank. As a department, we have not always moved fast enough. Delays in vaccine availability; bureaucratic blockages; and insufficient surge capacity when outbreaks occur—these are issues we acknowledge, and are actively addressing.

We now have in place a more agile and accountable structure, led by Deputy Director-General Dipepeneneng Serage, tasked with driving our new approach to biosecurity. In response to avian influenza, we have launched South Africa's first national avian influenza vaccination rollout, supported by poultry veterinarians from the University of Pretoria and the Agricultural Research Council. Vaccines have been secured, cold chain logistics are operational, and we have contracted 50 animal health technicians to support the effort on the ground.

Similarly, we have ordered vaccines to respond to FMD in KwaZulu-Natal and are intensifying tracing in Gauteng. Protocols are being streamlined, digital surveillance tools upgraded, and a new framework for early-warning alerts is under development.

Our approach is no longer about scrambling after a crisis has hit—it is about building lasting systems that prevent those crises in the first place.

At the heart of this new approach is the National Biosecurity Hub—a joint venture between the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Science and Innovation, launched in 2022 and hosted here at Innovation Africa. It is not just an institution, it is a signal of a new way of thinking.

The hub strengthens surveillance, supports real-time data exchange, and promotes rapid risk assessment across the plant and animal health spectrum. Through digital collections of pests and pathogens, field diagnostics, and a centralised biosecurity

information platform, it empowers decision-makers with the evidence they need to act early and act decisively.

The hub supports the goals of the Agriculture and Agro-Processing Master Plan (AAMP) and the Decadal Plan by integrating pest and disease management with export competitiveness and rural industrialisation.

One of its most impactful elements is the Graduate Internship Programme, bringing new energy, skills, and capacity into the sector. We are building not only resilience, but also careers.

South Africa is not alone in facing these challenges, nor are we without inspiration:

- In **France**, a massive avian influenza vaccination campaign protected their poultry sector with minimal disruption;
- In **Uganda**, community-led reporting systems flag outbreaks early;
- In the **Philippines**, mobile-based pest tracking connects farmers directly to authorities.

These systems work because they are built on trust, transparency, and timely communication. We are actively drawing lessons from these models as we tailor solutions to our unique context.

One of our most significant structural weaknesses is vaccine production.

Let me be candid: Onderstepoort Biological Products (OBP) must improve. There have been backlogs, infrastructure constraints, and missed delivery windows that we cannot afford to repeat.

My office has instituted quarterly performance reviews, brought in independent oversight, and is actively investigating diversification options to reduce our dependence on a single supplier. Vaccines are not a luxury. They are the first line of defence in any biosecurity system—and we will hold OBP accountable.

Another critical constraint is the shortage of veterinarians. In the poultry sector and across rural areas, demand far outstrips supply. Nationally, we require 400 veterinarians. We currently have around 70 in the public system.

To close this gap, we are expanding vet training posts, creating rural internships, and building regional partnerships. Through the Biosecurity Hub, we are also mapping career pathways to attract a new generation of animal health professionals.

Today, I am proposing the development of a National Biosecurity Compacta shared commitment between government, industry, academia, and civil society. This compact will:

- define baseline vaccine stock levels;
- clarify roles and responsibilities during outbreaks;
- embed data-sharing mechanisms and institutional partnerships like the Biosecurity Hub;
- provide a framework for coordinated, credible, and timely responses.

This is not about creating more paperwork. It is about getting everyone on the same page before the next crisis hits.

South Africa's biosecurity system is not only about defending against risk, it is about enabling growth. Export markets require sanitary and phytosanitary compliance. They demand evidence of control, traceability, and institutional readiness.
Strengthening our biosecurity systems opens the door to new trade opportunities, safeguards jobs, and boosts investor confidence in South African agriculture.

Colleagues, friends

Biosecurity is not a "nice-to-have." It is as fundamental to national stability as clean water, reliable electricity, or functioning roads. When it works, farmers prosper, food remains affordable, and our exports flourish. When it fails, the consequences are steep—economically, socially, and politically.

We have the tools. We have the institutions, and now, we have the momentum.

Let this summit be more than a dialogue. Let it be a turning point. A moment where we step forward, not in silos, but in solidarity, with urgency, and with a shared purpose.

Thank you for your commitment. Let us build the biosecurity system that South Africa needs—together.

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Issued by: The Ministry of Agriculture