



agriculture

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## MEDIA STATEMENT

27 January 2026

### MINISTER STEENHUISEN URGES UNITY AS LEGAL CHALLENGES THREATEN TO DERAIL FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE VACCINATION ROLLOUT

The Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen, and the Department of Agriculture note with concern the legal letter received from Saai, Sakeliga and Free State Agriculture demanding owners of livestock to be allowed to privately administer vaccines and which is also threatening legal action.

The department has further observed various social media, WhatsApp and SMS campaigns from these groups advertising legal action against the State, soliciting donations for an impending court case, and using the war on Foot and mouth disease (FMD) to drive membership recruitment.

Foot and mouth disease is a controlled animal disease governed strictly by the Animal Diseases Act, 1984 (Act No. 35 of 1984). Minister Steenhuisen warns that the department is obliged to follow the law in this regard. Litigation, in the midst of a serious outbreak, now seeks to challenge the very legislative framework and obligations required by the State to protect the national herd.

While anybody is free to approach the courts at any time, this legal venture is most unfortunate as it seeks to attack the Act under which the State is about to procure vaccines and roll out the FMD plan. This plan was formulated by the Ministerial Task Team made up of private and public sector scientists, veterinarians and academics. The rollout of this plan, along with clear immediate, medium- and long-term timeframes was announced by Minister Steenhuisen a fortnight ago. It marks the first time in 30 years that the State has a clear roadmap to defeat FMD.

The State has already acquired, monitored and administered two million vaccines from the Botswana Vaccine Institute (BVI) to date. Additionally, the issuing of permits for private companies to import vaccines, as local agents, has already commenced. Import permits for the Dollvet vaccine was issued to Dunevax and an additional import permit to import the Biogénesis Bagó vaccine is imminent.

However, the department warns that this progress is now at risk. The threatened court action could well derail the purchasing and rollout of vaccines while the Saai/Sakeliga/Free State Agriculture case moves through the court process and the department waits to obtain a clear directive from the court in this matter.

Technical responses required by officials and veterinarians within the department, to answer such court challenge, will divert critical veterinary and departmental resources away from the frontline fight against FMD. In addition, financial resources that could go towards vaccine purchase or personnel recruitment will have to be diverted to answer the court challenge.

The department maintains that claims proposing a vaccine free-for-all is short-sighted and reckless and flies in the face of established international and local precedence for disease control. We have already seen the disastrous effects of unfettered access to vaccines that have been illegally imported into KwaZulu-Natal by certain farmers and the serious risk this has posed.

The Scientific Path to FMD-Free Status is very clear. In order to regain the "FMD-free status with vaccination" from the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH), South Africa must prove there has been no virus transmission for at least 12 months. This requires a strictly controlled vaccination rollout; official surveillance; strict movement controls and systematic vaccination coverage that is able to be documented and verified.

Without centralised monitoring and State-led control over the process, the country will fail to achieve this goal, causing long-term damage to agricultural exports and negating the entire strategy of vaccination.

The private sector, industry bodies and others have been included in every step of the way; from the initial lekgotla on FMD to the Ministerial Task Team and now also in the FMD Industry Coordination Council. The department has furthermore already committed to working with private veterinarians and animal technicians as the vaccine rollout proceeds.

“We urge the farming community to be wary of promises by lobby groups attempting to profit from the hardships farmers are currently enduring. These actions threaten a scientific framework designed to ensure the country wins the war against FMD once and for all.

“Now is not the time for distraction: what we need now is a united and full focus on dealing with the current crisis and rolling out with scale and fast track our national strategy on Foot and Mouth Disease containment. Once the immediate crisis has passed, organisations can then indulge in all manners of litigation. But in the immediate time, we must in move in a unified manner and with the speed and determination to contain the current outbreak. This is the way we will win the war against FMD,” Minister Steenhuisen emphasised.

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