

Opening Address by Minister John Steenhuisen

FMD Indaba | Department of Agriculture

Programme Director,

Esteemed veterinary professionals,

Leaders from organised agriculture,

Colleagues from provincial departments,

Officials, stakeholders, and partners in animal health,

Distinguished guests,

Good morning,

It is both a pleasure and a necessity to open today's Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) Indaba, a crucial gathering at a time when South Africa's livestock industry is under immense pressure, not just from the biological spread of disease, but from the consequences of policy failure, institutional fatigue and an outdated response model that no longer meets the scale or complexity of what we face.

The presence of so many role-players here today: scientists, regulators, provincial officials, producers and private veterinarians, speaks to a shared understanding: that if we continue as we have, we will continue to fall short. And when we fall short, it is not only the state that pay the price, but also farmers, workers, exporters, retailers and the public at large.

A Country Held Hostage by a Broken System

FMD is not a new threat. We have faced outbreaks before. But the lessons of the most recent outbreak are sobering, and in some cases, painful.

What we saw was a response system stretched to its limits, with breakdowns in communication, severe delays in vaccine availability, confusion over movement controls, and an alarming lack of readiness at several levels of government. Farmers were unsure of the measures. Provinces were uncertain of the protocols. And while the virus spread, trust in the State's capacity to respond continued to erode.

One of the most damaging consequences of this outbreak was our inability to contain the economic fallout. Because South Africa has no functional regionalisation

framework, the entire country was penalised through the eyes of our trading partners, despite the outbreak being localised to specific zones. Exports of cloven-hoofed animals, and their products, were suspended or slowed. Jobs were lost. And the reputational damage to our animal health system is one that will take time, and action, to repair.

The core lesson is this: we cannot continue managing FMD outbreaks with outdated structures and fragmented authority, hoping that a patchwork of short-term measures will deliver long-term stability. We need an innovative approach—one that is science-based, constitutionally aligned, and practically implementable.

(1) We Must Regionalise – Properly and Urgently

At the heart of this new approach is the imperative to regionalise our disease control framework.

Every credible trading nation in the world understands the principle of regionalisation, that an outbreak in one part of a country should not result in blanket trade restrictions for the entire nation. However, South Africa remains woefully behind in establishing, certifying and maintaining disease control zones that can be recognised by our international partners.

Let me be clear: the failure to regionalise is not due to a lack of veterinary science. It is due to a lack of institutional coordination, legal clarity and capacity.

To address this, I have appointed two senior veterinarians, Dr Emily Mogajane and Dr Nomsa Mnisi with extensive field, government and international trade experience to lead the development of a comprehensive national regionalisation framework. Their work will focus on:

- Defining and operationalising regional disease zones for all major livestock sectors, in consultation with industry;
- Supporting provinces to assume their responsibilities as prescribed in the Animal Health Act, 2002 (Act No.7 of 2002), aligning disease control with our Constitutional division of powers; and

- Strengthening interdepartmental capacity to process export and import applications swiftly and credibly.

It is unacceptable that South Africa takes years to respond to import health questionnaires, delays that have cost us market access and weakened our negotiating position. This is not a regulatory issue; it is a capacity issue, and we are taking steps to fix it.

(2) Vaccine Security Requires Private Sector Partnership

Another crucial area where the system broke down during the recent outbreak was vaccine availability.

The national FMD vaccine bank was depleted. The production cycle was misaligned with outbreak realities. The Agricultural Research Council (ARC) currently lacks the infrastructure to produce FMD vaccines at the scale and speed required to respond to outbreaks.

As a result, we were compelled to import vaccines from Botswana, to mount even a partial response. This situation is unsustainable for a country with South Africa's livestock footprint and export ambitions.

Government is taking this seriously. In the interim, we are securing imports and working to establish forward-looking supply contracts that will ensure minimum stock levels of FMD and other priority vaccines, before the next outbreak, not after.

But this cannot be done by the State alone.

Today, I want to send a clear message to the industry: If you want predictability, you must also invest.

We are calling on the livestock industry, especially the red meat, dairy and game sectors, to begin co-financing vaccine procurement. This does not mean you will manage the vaccines or the cold chains. But it does mean that, like in other agro-industries, we establish structured partnerships that ensure we are not caught unprepared again.

The time has come to build a nationally managed but jointly funded vaccine bank, not only for FMD, but for lumpy skin disease, brucellosis, Rift Valley Fever, and all other controlled diseases affecting trade and production.

(3) Infrastructure Must Serve Control, Not Hinder It

Lastly, we must confront the infrastructure deficit in our protection zones.

As long as animals are forced to be moved illegally because of the absence of local abattoirs or feedlots, we will never be able to enforce movement control effectively.

This is not just a veterinary issue; it is a spatial planning and rural development issue. That is why we will be earmarking funds in this fiscal year to support the establishment of feedlots and abattoirs within the protection zones, particularly in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga.

These facilities will provide alternatives to illicit trade. They will create rural jobs. Furthermore, they will help us enforce the very measures we need to maintain our FMD-free zones.

(4) Animal Science Research and Development

To effectively reduce the spread of animal diseases, while also responding to the growing challenges of climate change, we must make a deliberate and sustained investment in scientific research and development. Government funding alone will not be sufficient. We therefore call upon you, the captains of the livestock industry, to partner with us in this effort.

In the coming weeks, I will be meeting with the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC) to determine how a portion of statutory levies can be earmarked specifically for research and development, with a focus on both animal health and climate resilience.

The Agricultural Research Council (ARC), South Africa's sole statutory research institution in this field, is undergoing a remarkable turnaround. For the first time in over a decade, the ARC has recorded a surplus, thanks to deliberate efforts by the

Department, under the leadership of Director-General Ramasodi, to reinvest in its core scientific capacity. But more is needed.

We must elevate the ARC to the same level as its international counterparts. By working in partnership with the University of Pretoria's Biosecurity Hub, and by channelling industry levies into ARC-led research, we can build a coordinated, world-class research ecosystem that meets the biosecurity and climate challenges of our time.

A Shared Future, a Shared Responsibility

Colleagues,

This Indaba is not about apportioning blame. It is about fixing what has gone wrong, and building a system which can withstand the next outbreak, and the one after that.

We must break the cycle of reactive containment and move toward proactive, coordinated disease management.

To do so will require:

- Stronger provincial implementation;
- Clearer national coordination;
- An empowered veterinary corps; and
- A private sector that sees biosecurity not as a burden, but as a precondition for growth.

To ensure that these outcomes of this Indaba are not just aspirational but actionable, I will be appointing a dedicated team immediately after this gathering to consolidate the proposals and insights shared here today. This team will be tasked with finalising a practical, time-bound operational plan, one that reflects both the urgency of our challenge and the collective wisdom in this room. That plan will be presented to me within a defined timeframe and will serve as the blueprint for our implementation going forward.

Let us use today to be honest about what has not worked. Let us bring forward ideas that can scale. And let us commit – not only in theory, but also in budget lines and action plans – to building a livestock economy that is competitive, credible and secure.

I thank you for your time, your expertise and your partnership.

Let us get to work.

Thank you.